“An Undeniable Presence”: Racial justice work among South Asian American musicians

By

Arathi Govind

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Professor Michael Omi

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Abstract

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This dissertation concerns four well known South Asian American musicians based in New York City and the San Francisco Bay Area: Vijay Iyer, Sunny Jain, Rekha Malhotra (DJ Rekha), and Rupa Marya. It is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted from 2016-2017, supported by a Margery Lowens Dissertation Fellowship from the Society for American Music and a grant from the Center for Race and Gender at UC Berkeley. My work, which included conducting interviews, archival research, and attending numerous concerts, rallies, and protests, investigates how the four central artists use their work in music as a means to further aims of achieving racial equity. Ultimately, I argue that contemporary racialization of brown people, particularly in the post-9/11 and Trump Era United States, has led to increased involvement in racial justice advocacy work among South Asian American musicians.

In the first chapter of my dissertation, I use Howard Becker's theory on art worlds and Benedict Anderson's idea of imagined communities as starting points to show how political solidarities, as defined by Sally Scholz, create and constitute activist networks among these musicians. Each of the central chapters concerns one of the artists, highlighting how their musical practice advances racial justice causes. My chapter on Iyer shows how he uses his privileged status to re-orient his primarily White audiences' attention toward structural racism in public concerts, interviews, and lectures. My chapter on Sunny Jain highlights how his seemingly utopic musical and political ideals emanate from the religious Jain concept of *anekantavada* ("pluralism"). In the third chapter, on Malhotra (DJ Rekha), I show how Basement Bhangra, a party she organized monthly from 1997-2017, served as a space to fundraise and organize for progressive political causes. Finally, I look at Rupa Marya's simultaneous careers as a physician and musician as extensions of her work as a healer and anti-capitalist. Throughout the chapters, I examine how these artists' left-leaning music networks overlap, maintaining that these connections have as much to do with their politics as their shared cultural heritage.

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Acknowledgements

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Chapter 1: South Asian American Music and Racial Justice Work

Introduction

This dissertation examines the work of four second-generation Indian American musicians (Rekha Malhotra, Sunny Jain, Vijay Iyer, and Rupa Marya) and their work as allies, advocates, and activists for social justice. There are two major purposes to this study: one specific, the other more broad. First, I aim to understand specifically how post-9/11 and Trump Era racialization of brown people has impacted these musicians' activities, collaborations, and musical work. Second, I intend to paint a more extensive and accurate picture of what constitutes fulfilling work by understanding *musical work* as multifaceted: involving labor (rehearsal, paid performances and speaking engagements, touring), politics (advocating and organizing), race (interracial collaborations), cultural identity (representing South Asian-ness), and music (instrumentation, lyrics, music genres, actual sound waves).

All four of these musicians were born after the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act amendments that loosened previous immigration quotas, allowing for highly skilled South Asians such as their Indian parents to immigrate to the US in large numbers for the first time.[1] Today, South Asians are the fastest growing Asian group in the United States, with Indians making up the large majority.[2] South Asian Americans are often viewed as potential threats to European American ways of life in ways that equate anti-western extremism with conflated categories of geographical origin, religion, ethnicity, and race,[3] particularly within post-9/11 and Trump Era national racial logic.[4] My work thinks through how this racial logic has impacted the kinds of political solidarities these musicians form, and perhaps even more importantly, how they choose to foreground these solidarities through their work.

The musicians in this study were born between 1971 and 1975. Although they are not the only four musicians who meet these criteria, I chose these particular artists because they are among the best-known Indian American musicians who regularly tour, record, and perform nationally and internationally. I also chose them because although there are broad studies on second-generation behavior, especially in psychology,[5] there are few studies on second-

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[1] Karen Leonard, *The South Asian Americans* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 39.
[2] "Demographic Snapshot December 2015," South Asian Americans Leading Together, accessed July 21, 2019, http://saalt.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Demographic-Snapshot-updated_Dec-2015.pdf.
[3] Deepa Iyer, *We Too Sing America: South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh Immigrants Shape Our Multicultural Future* (New York: The New Press, 2015).
[4] I call this a "logic" not because it is rational, but because people with these xenophobic beliefs often attempt to justify their stances using anecdotal evidence that they believe is rational. The fact that Trump was even elected is indicative of the very pervasiveness of this "logic."
[5] See, for example, Ajit K. Das and Sharon F. Kemp, "Between Two Worlds: Counseling South Asian Americans," *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 25, no. 1 (1997): 23-33; or Anne C. Deepak, "Parenting and the Process of Migration: Possibilities within South Asian Families," *Child Welfare* 84, no. 5 (2005): 585; or Dana Sahi Iyer and Nick Haslam,

generation South Asian American artists. I aim to answer broad and specific questions about these artists: How and why do these musicians engage in social justice advocacy and activism, and how do these politics manifest for them in their individual musical practices?

Three of these artists reside in New York City (Malhotra, Jain, and Iyer), while the fourth lives in the San Francisco Bay Area (Marya). The genres of music in which each typically operates differ. One of the important connecting threads throughout this study is the artists' mutual acquaintance and their collaborations, despite operating in different music scenes. Of course, some of this is due to their shared cultural backgrounds as Indian American musicians, but none of the four collaborate exclusively with other South Asians or play music whose influences can be solely traced to South Asian musics. Their shared political views play an enormous role in why their musical work overlaps. This became clear to me, as I will elaborate on later, when I met with a music producer in New York City who exclusively produces Indian American pop artists with no overt progressive politics as part of their musical practice.

Throughout this study, I trace Malhotra, Jain, Iyer, and Marya's overlapping networks to push beyond the limitations of studies that so frequently constrain our understandings of how musicians come to know each other through proximity of either genre or location. For example, past studies on South Asian American musics, like Sunaina Maira's *Desis in the House*[6] and Nitasha Sharma's *Hip Hop Desis*,[7] discussed in more detail later in the chapter, focus on one music genre in one location. Another survey of South Asian American music, like Nair and Balaji's *Desi Rap*,[8] talks about music scenes in multiple places in the United States, but they are brought together in this volume because they are all hip hop scenes. Instead of genre or location, I use politics as a measure of proximity, or the nexus between these musicians.

My work on these four musicians also aims to understand how political advocacy and activism can be performed, and it is here that their music takes a more central role. I ask: how do these musicians *perform* their politics? And more specifically, how do they *sound* it? Rather than drawing a distinct boundary between political and non-political performance, these four artists operate on a continuum, sometimes performing overt political actions, and other times more implictly. I answer these questions by examining select audio recordings on studio records and live concerts I attended during my fieldwork in 2016-2017, bolstered by personal interviews and analyses of digital and print media. In particular, I draw attention to how their scenes overlap because of their shared cultural heritage *and* their political messages. My argument is twofold: firstly, these four Indian American musicians use their political and social capital in order to strengthen social justice advocacy networks that, though loosely connected, share similar goals of working toward eliminating racial inequities. Secondly, despite music critics' attempts to

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"Body Image and Eating Disturbance among South Asian‐American Women: The Role of Racial Teasing," *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 34, no. 1 (2003): 142-147.

[6] Sunaina Maira, *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in NYC* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012).

[7] Nitasha Tamar Sharma, *Hip Hop Desis: South Asian Americans, Blackness, and a Global Race Consciousness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

[8] Ajay Nair and Murali Balaji, eds., *Desi Rap: Hip Hop and South Asian America* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008).

neatly categorize these artists' work, I argue for a more holistic understanding of their music by showcasing their involvement in multiple music scenes and genres.

Each chapter in the body of this study is organized around an individual and a major theme. In Malhotra's chapter, I focus on the transnational dimensions of *bhangra* as it manifested in her deejaying practice. Jain's chapter revolves around his use of a religious Jain concept, *anekāntavāda*, which he calls pluralism, to organize his sociopolitical beliefs. In the fourth chapter, I examine Iyer's complex relationship with Blackness and Whiteness within a genre that has been often defined by this binary. Finally, I explore Marya's life as a healer, which encompasses her work as both a musician and physician.

The remainder of this chapter provides the necessary background to broadly contextualize and historicize each of the subsequent chapters. I begin by tracing South Asian American history and identity formation to point out how conceptions of South Asian American-ness have changed and continues to change due to historical events, changes in immigration law, and differences between generations. I follow this discussion by elaborating upon how South Asian Americans have built coalitions with other racial and ethnic groups in the United States, and writing about tensions that have emerged in interracial and inter-ethnic interactions. It is within this section that I clarify my understanding of political solidarity and activism as they are used throughout this dissertation. The final section of the chapter is a survey of literature on South Asian American music both in isolation and in collaboration with non-South Asian artists.

South Asian American History and Identity

The history of South Asians in the United States dates back to well over a hundred years ago. The sociopolitical status of South Asian immigrants in US society has transformed numerous times based upon changing immigration and citizenship laws, as well as shifting demographics through the last century and a half. Some of these changes have helped South Asian Americans gain economic and social capital, while other decisions have implicitly or explicitly prevented South Asian Americans from participating in White-dominated mainstream American society. These changes do not represent a steady, linear progression toward more inclusivity; rather, there have been forward and backward steps throughout this history. I complicate this history further by recognizing Indian hegemony within South Asian American history, which has had a problematic homogenizing effect in South Asian American history. In this section, I outline these political and social changes because they help illuminate many of the reasons the four musicians in this study engage in racial justice work: to raise awareness of the cultural, economic, and religious diversity of South Asian Americans, and to use their relative privilege to combat racial inequities that disproportionately affect African Americans, Latinx Americans, and indigenous Americans.

South Asia as a whole is the region encompassing India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Bhutan, and the Maldives. The first major population of South Asians in North America arrived in colonized Hawaii in the late 1800s as "coolies," or indentured farm laborers who were primarily brought in as a replacement for formerly enslaved Blacks who

previously worked fields.[9] These South Asians mostly hailed from the Punjab region of modern-day India and Pakistan. By the first decades of the twentieth century, many South Asian men had arrived in California, Oregon, and Washington as migrant farm laborers. Most of these men were of the Sikh faith, although they were often mistakenly called "Hindoos," a catchall term for South Asian men at the time. As Karen Leonard has written about extensively, many of these men ended up marrying Mexican American women. This was partially due to anti-miscegenation and anti-women immigration laws in the US, as well as attitudes toward women in South Asia, who were encouraged to stay and raise children while men worked in the US, sending money back to their families on the subcontinent. This resulted in a significant population of Indian-Mexican families, particularly in California's Central Valley.[10]

Due to the expansion of Asian immigration exclusion laws,[11] the population of South Asians did not grow significantly in the early through mid-twentieth century. However, in 1965, the US government decided to expand Asian immigration for the first time in large numbers both because of a growing need for people in professional industries that called for highly skilled and highly educated workers, and due to internal and external pressures to be less exclusionary during the Civil Rights Era.[12] It is within this context that the parents of the four musicians in this study were able to obtain visas to immigrate to the US, where they went on to settle and raise their families.

Since 1965, South Asian Americans have created tight-knit communities throughout the United States, particularly in large metropolitan areas like Los Angeles, New York, Washington DC, Detroit, Dallas, Chicago, and the Silicon Valley. Unlike the small populations of South Asian immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, very few of these new migrants worked in rural farming communities, but rather, most settled in urban and suburban areas. Today, these communities are extremely diverse. South Asian Americans speak dozens of different languages, and practice over half a dozen religions, including Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Jainism, Judaism, Sikhism, and Zoroastianism.

South Asian Americans have also formed cultural and arts organizations. Since at least the 1960s, Indian classical music associations have cropped up throughout the nation. I myself grew up attending Carnatic (South Indian classical music) concerts in Los Angeles sponsored by the South Indian Music Academy (http://simala.net/). There are similar nonprofits in most metropolitan areas throughout the United States. South Asian classical and folk dance schools, local and national organizations for South Asian American physicians, and nonprofits geared toward helping first generation immigrants transition to US American life are also common. It is

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[9] Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*, rev. ed. (New York: Hatchette Book Group, 1989, 1998), 34-36.
[10] Leonard, *South Asian Americans*, 46-56.
[11] The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act was the first of several laws restricting immigration for individuals from a particular country. In 1917, the Barred Zone Act expanded these restrictions to include all of Asia. National origin quotas began in 1924 with the Johnson-Reed Act. Most Asians remained unable to immigrate to the United States until the 1965 Hart-Celler Act (as did people from most parts of the world other than Western and Northern Europe).
[12] Leonard, *South Asian Americans*, 39.

not uncommon for these organizations to be compartmentalized based upon religion, language, culture, educational background, and country of origin, although many South Asian American organizations are more inclusive.

Statistically, South Asian Americans have done well economically, opening businesses such as grocery and convenience stores, gas stations, and motels, or entering highly skilled professions such as medicine, computer science, and engineering. It is important to note that this economic success is associated with Indian hegemony within South Asian America. Indians, who make up nearly eighty percent of South Asian Americans, according to the Washington DC-based nonprofit and advocacy organization South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT),[13] out-earn all other ethnic and racial groups, according to 2016 data from the U.S. Census Bureau.[14] Despite these successes, there are many South Asian Americans, including Indian Americans, who struggle to make ends meet and/or have tenuous resident or citizenship statuses. According to 2010 U.S. Census data and the 2017 American Community Survey, there are approximately 5.4 million South Asians living in the United States, over 600,000 of whom are undocumented. This marks a seventy-two percent increase in undocumented South Asians since 2010, which SAALT claims is due to several hundreds of thousands of (mostly Indian) immigrants who have overstayed their visas since 2016 after stricter visa regulations were instituted by the Trump administration. There is also a large annual income disparity between Indian and non-Indian South Asian Americans, with the vast majority of poor South Asian Americans being non-Indian. Bangladeshi and Nepali Americans in particular, report the lowest median household incomes among South Asian groups in the US[15] Thus, the data collected by government and nonprofit agencies about South Asian Americans tend to be skewed toward economically successful Indians. The reasons for economic success in many Indian American communities are expanded upon below, but in short, because of post-partition history and caste privilege, Indians with greater educational access have been able to achieve more upward mobility than other minority groups throughout the world. This access is often related to Hindu caste privilege, both directly and indirectly. To varying but significant degrees, Malhotra, Jain, Iyer, and Marya are products of families who had this kind of educational and social capital and, as a result, have been able to achieve a great deal of upward mobility in the United States. As will become clear in their individual chapters, this is significant because their success as musicians is, at least in part, due to their class backgrounds.

The racial standing of South Asians in the United States has always been complex. Citing similar phenotypic characteristics and the geographical presence of the Caucasus Mountains in South Asia, a man named Bhagat Singh Thind took on the US government to try to attain

[13] "Demographic Snapshot December 2015," South Asian Americans Leading Together, accessed July 21, 2019, http://saalt.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Demographic-Snapshot-updated_Dec-2015.pdf.
[14] Sanjoy Chakravorty, Devesh Kapur and Nirvikar Singh, *The Other One Percent: Indians in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
[15] "Demographic Snapshot April 2019," South Asian Americans Leading Together, accessed July 21, 2019, http://saalt.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/SAALT-Demographic-Snapshot-2019.pdf.

Caucasian status in 1923.[16] In this landmark case, the US government ruled that Caucasian status could only be granted to those with white (light) skin, and Thind lost. Attaining Caucasian status would have given Thind and other South Asians more rights at the time, particularly having to do with citizenship and landowning. Caucasian and white statuses continue to be synonymous in colloquial and legal terms in the US today. Although South Asian Americans cannot attain white status, being largely economically successful compared to other racial and ethnic groups has meant that South Asian Americans are frequently held up against other racial and cultural groups as model minorities, along with Asian Americans writ large. The model minority stereotype is the still-persistent myth that Asian Americans and other supposedly successful minorities, such as Jewish Americans, may serve as "exemplary models for other minorities based (usually) upon measures of income, education, and public benefit utilization rates."[17] Most frequently, the predominantly white mainstream media and the US government compare education and income disparities between Asian Americans and African Americans or Latinx Americans in order to claim that upward mobility is possible for minority groups. These comparisons have been extremely harmful to all groups involved for at least three major reasons: 1) they presume homogeneity within minority groups, 2) they presume that all people in the United States have equal opportunity from birth and that the US is a meritocracy, and 3) they ignore the historical, legal, and social circumstances that impact how and why different minority groups have radically different outcomes. As sociologist Lisa Sun-Hee Park writes, "the model minority myth actually reinforces established racial inequalities" by "function[ing] as a political mechanism of control that alters one's sense of reality to justify the unequal social order."[18] In other words, Park and other Asian American scholars such as Sucheng Chan,[19] David Palumbo-Liu,[20] Claire Jean Kim,[21] and many others have argued that the model minority stereotype upholds a racial hierarchy in which Whites are at the top, and so-called model minorities can come *close* to attaining white status by virtue of their relative economic and educational success. Of course, Asian Americans can never actually obtain white status, and in fact are often relegated continued foreigner status (often called "perpetual foreigners"[22]), even if they have lived in the US for generations.

South Asian Americans receiving similar treatment to other Asian American groups is largely what led them to join the Asian American movement eventually. The Asian American movement itself began during the Civil Rights Era in the 1960s. Prior to this era, Asian immigrants in the United States did not have a shared identity, instead grouping themselves based upon country of origin or linguistic background. Upon recognizing their shared oppression

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[16] Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 299.
[17] Lisa Sun-Hee Park, "Continuing Significance of the Model Minority Myth: The Second Generation," *Social Justice* 35, no. 2 (2008): 134.
[18] Ibid., 136.
[19] Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1991).
[20] David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999).
[21] Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics & Society* 27, no. 1 (1999): 105-138.
[22] Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 432.

and the ways non-Asian Americans similarly racialized them, Asian Americans modeled their own campaign after Black civil rights activism in order to be recognized as both a racialized group and a political movement.[23] During the 1960s, they even joined forces with Black activist groups like the Black Panthers, exchanging radical leftist ideas, some of which emerged from leftist movements in China.[24] In other words, Asian Americans realized that they would have more political power if they worked together, rather than remaining compartmentalized. However, South Asian Americans largely remained outside of the Asian American movement until the 1980s, with identification and membership in Asian American organizations increasing steadily through the 1990s.[25] Building coalitions with other Asian groups has been politically valuable for Asian American groups overall, as it has increased membership in Asian American groups. Rather than taking away from their cultural identities, Asian American tends to be an addition to most Asian immigrant identities. For example, in addition to identifying as South Asian American, the musicians in this study also identify as Asian American, drawing upon this legacy of coalition building and political power.

Even so, South Asians continue to feel somewhat isolated within Asian American organizations. This was evident to me at the March 2018 Association for Asian American Studies national conference in San Francisco, where the South Asian Section openly discussed its continued frustration with their "a part, yet apart" status. The significantly different histories of the South Asian subcontinent magnify these feelings of separation. Although South Asians have often been treated similarly to East and Southeast Asians in the United States, in terms of being both perpetual foreigners and model minorities, they often feel differently racialized than these groups because many South Asians have major phenotypic differences, such as darker skin and different facial features. This is not universally true throughout South Asia, of course, as there are many South Asians whose phenotypes more closely resemble other Asian groups. Similarly, the majority of South Asian Americans practice Hinduism and Islam, while the majority of Asian Americans as a whole are either Christian or unaffiliated with a religion.[26] The four musicians in this study, however, do fit these criteria: all four have dark skin and come from non-Christian religious traditions that are predominantly found in South Asia (Hinduism and Jainism).

Racialization of South Asians has been further complicated since 9/11. In general, South Asians and Middle Easterners have long been homogenized by Americans outside of these groups, presumably due to shared phenotypic characteristics and poor understandings of geography and history. Additionally obfuscating this picture is the fact that the majority of

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[23] Deborah Wong, "The Asian American Body in Performance," in *Music and the Racial Imagination*, ed. Philip Bohlman and Ronald M. Radano (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 77.
[24] Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006).
[25] Farah Ibrahim, Hifumi Ohnishi and Daya Singh Sandhu, "Asian American Identity Development: A Culture Specific Model for South Asian Americans," *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 25, no. 1 (1997): 34-50.
[26] "Asian Americans: A Mosaic of Faiths," Pew Research Center, last updated July 19, 2012, https://www.pewforum.org/2012/07/19/asian-americans-a-mosaic-of-faiths-overview/.

people from these regions do not practice Christian religions. As Deepa Iyer writes in her 2015 book, *We Too Sing America*, Christian Americans, who currently make up over seventy percent of the country's population, frequently conflate all non-Christian religions.[27] The conflation of people who look vaguely South Asian or Middle Eastern and do not practice Christianity has intensified for non-Hispanic brown people in a post-9/11 context. South Asian Americans have largely responded in two ways: creating new coalitions to fight against racial profiling and violence against AMEMSA (Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, South Asian) groups, or, as some non-Muslims have done, completely denying any affiliation with these groups. This latter response has even resulted in outright bigotry, as evidenced by the embarrassingly named group "Hindus for Trump," who supported Trump at least partially due to his anti-Muslim rhetoric, which has been likely magnified by rising Hindu nationalism in contemporary India.[28]

There are also major differences between first- and second-generation South Asian Americans. First-generation South Asian Americans tend to consider linguistic, religious, and caste affiliations as the important factors in building their South Asian American community. These designations tend to become less important for subsequent generations, who often identify more with larger racial or ethnic categorizations. Changing conceptions of caste, in the second generation in particular, is an important topic that requires thorough research in and of itself, but one which I have not studied extensively for this dissertation. Yet it is important to acknowledge that three out of the four musicians in this study come from upper-caste Hindu families, while the fourth is, as his surname implies, of the Jain faith. The privileges afforded to these musicians' parents in terms of access to education and immigration opportunity is at least partially due to caste-privilege. Second-generation South Asian Americans often lack awareness of how caste operates in their own lives, yet those in higher castes still tend to experience caste privilege unconsciously. Thus, I do wish to acknowledge the role of caste privilege in the opportunities these musicians have had.[29]

As stated earlier, although South Asia is an extremely diverse region in culture, religion, language, ethnicity, and food, Punjabi Indians are often the default representatives of South Asian culture. In this study, three out of four musicians are culturally Punjabi, a region divided during the Partition of India. Malhotra, Jain, and Marya all trace their ancestry to the Punjab region, which is located in the northwestern part of contemporary India. Iyer is South Indian, primarily tracing his roots to the state of Tamil Nadu. Thus, this study focuses only on Indian American musicians, who cannot claim to be representative of the musical activities South Asian

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[27] Iyer, *We Too Sing America*.

[28] "Hindus for Trump," Hindus for Trump, accessed July 21, 2019, http://hindusfortrump.blogspot.com/. This blog post contains no less than six references to Muslims, repeatedly suggesting Muslim connections to terrorism. The blog's main page states, "We're not going to slavishly tow [*sic*] the Trump or Republican line, but we also know that the Left-Islamist world alliance is right now the most pressing threat against Hindus and humanity." (Note that the same post is strangely dated "August 27, 2020.")

[29] A new study on caste in the United States, released by Equality Labs, a South Asian organization dedicated to eliminating caste, can be found here: "Caste in the United States: A Survery of Caste Among South Asian Americans," Equity Labs, accessed July 21, 2019, https://www.equalitylabs.org/caste-survey-read.

American musicians writ large. Having said that, I use South Asian broadly throughout the dissertation at times because the musicians themselves identify as part of the larger South Asian community. Sometimes embedded within that signification is an Indian-centric, Brahmin-centric, and/or Punjabi-centric view. Throughout the dissertation, I attempt to clarify these positions and significations, even when the musicians themselves do not acknowledge these distinctions.

All of this is to say that there is no common consensus about racial or ethnic identity both among South Asian Americans and other Americans. Most choose these affiliations consciously, but their reasons for choosing one identifier over another can vary significantly. Moreover, the same person may identify differently in different contexts, or switch between two or more different identifiers in the same conversation or context. Sometimes these choices are strategic, sometimes not. In this dissertation, I will explore some of the reasons behind these musicians' choices: why they choose one identifier or not, and in what context they choose one or more, and not others.

Social Justice Orientations

On a surface level, it may seem easy to explain the connections between Malhotra, Jain, Iyer, and Marya: they are all second-generation Indian American musicians, born in the early-to-mid-1970s, operating in New York City and the Bay Area. My choice to profile these four may seem obvious, then. This dissertation, however, reveals connections that go beyond ethnic and cultural ties, tying their leftist political orientations and political solidarity work to their musical connections. In other words, without their dedication to social justice work, their cultural and generational ties would not be as significant. There are numerous South Asian American musicians in the United States, including some who have worked with these four artists, who do not engage in the kind of political work that these artists do. My focus on these particular musicians grew out of an interest in thinking through how politics can create and strengthen musicians' networks that would not otherwise exist. In this case, their politics also strengthen their individual and shared understandings of South Asian American culture, and deeply informs a coalitional politics with other racial and ethnic groups.

This is not to deny that their Indian-ness is an important factor in my choosing them, and even in how they came to be connected on some level. However, if I were interested in conducting a survey of Indian Americans in popular music writ large, this would be a very different dissertation. In fact, during my fieldwork, I often found it difficult to convey how important the musicians' politics were in describing my project to other Indian Americans. Frequently upon describing my project to them, they responded excitedly, "You should meet so-and-so! They are Indian American and they play music." This happened most often when speaking with older first-generation Indian Americans. I found out halfway through my fieldwork year that my name was circulating among some Indian Americans in New York and northern New Jersey when a music producer who works exclusively with South Asian American artists reached out to me to discuss our respective work. When I met with him in early 2017, it quickly became clear that the artists he produced did not engage in political activism as any intentional part of their music practices. Rather, he works with them simply because they are local *desi* artists attempting to make it in the popular music world. *Desi* is a term used most often

to describe South Asians in diaspora,[30] and although it does signal being part of a greater South Asian community, it does not have ties to a particular political orientation outside of that. In other words, the majority of American musicians who identify as *desi* are not consciously engaging in social justice activism, even if their goals are to draw attention to South Asian American culture. Aside from sharing an ethnic and racial background, then, the artists this producer works with are not connected to the four in this study. I state all of this to reinforce that although Indian-ness was a starting point for me, Malhotra, Jain, Iyer, and Marya's shared desire to work toward social justice is the main organizing principle behind this dissertation.

Social justice is a broad term that, at a most general level, refers to fair distribution of wealth, resources, and opportunities. How that aim should be achieved varies greatly from person to person and group to group. Thus, it is important to clarify what I mean when I refer to social justice in this dissertation. Malhotra, Jain, Iyer, and Marya are all far-left leaning liberals in a US political context, although the degree to which they lean varies in important ways to be expounded upon in subsequent chapters. Overall, however, they share similar visions of what a just and equitable society would look like.

As many social justice scholars write, achieving social justice is easier said than done. There are multiple factors that contribute to peoples' oppression and limit their access. In *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*, Lee Anne Bell writes that we need to start by "identifying the particular histories, geographies, and characteristics of specific forms of oppression as well as the intersections across isms that mutually reinforce them at both the systemic and individual levels."[31] In other words, intersectionality is important in achieving racial justice since it can be difficult to identify one distinct factor that prevents someone from having equitable access. Moreover, as Bell points out, considering the individual is as important as considering the groups from which an individual hails because of each individual's unique set of constraints and struggles.

In *An Ethics of Improvisation*, Tracey Nicholls agrees, writing that achieving social justice means everyone having equitable access to execute and achieve their individual goals and being able "to participate in communities that recognize their value as community members."[32] This is the meaning of social justice I find most suitable in the context of this dissertation, as it acknowledges both the group and the individual within the definition itself. Nicholls argues that there are structural injustices that manifest at individual and governmental levels that prevent people from being able to achieve their goals. She goes on to clarify her differing expectations of governments and individuals:

> What my conception of social justice wants from governments is infrastructure that ensures the availability of basics (like food, shelter, and work) for everyone and also

[30] Maira, *Desis in the House*, 4.
[31] Lee Anne Bell, "Theoretical Foundations for Social Justice Education," in *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*, 3rd ed., ed. Maurianne Adams and Lee Anne Bell, with Diane J. Goodman and Khyati Y. Joshi (New York: Routledge, 2016), 14.
[32] Tracey Nicholls, *An Ethics of Improvisation: Aesthetic Possibilities for a Political Future* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 21.

> ensures access to levels of education and health care sufficient to make possible everyone's participation is society. What my social justice wants from individuals is an understanding that none of us exists in isolation from society and that, because all of us benefit from a healthy and responsive society, each of us therefore bears some responsibility for developing ourselves as good community members.[33]

I find this conception apt because it highlights how neither individuals nor the systems and organizations in which they are immersed can be exempt from the project of achieving social justice. To this, I would add the responsibilities of groups like communities, and non-governmental institutions, to be involved in the project of achieving justice. This is a view that Malhotra, Jain, Iyer, and Marya would agree with.

For all four musicians, race is the most salient and urgent social justice issue in the United States because the country was founded on, and continues to be troubled by, racial difference. It is the issue for which they most frequently engage in activities I consider activism (conscious actions meant to bring about social change) or advocacy (speaking out on behalf of an oppressed person or persons). I use activism and advocacy broadly to refer to politically motivated actions, words, music, and other activities. Following contemporary feminist scholars, I even take seemingly mundane actions seriously, looking at "the crucial role played by *individuals embedded in communities* in shaping the social networks and relations necessary for social change" because, as happened during the Civil Rights Era, these changes "begin in informal and localized interactions and may evolve into more formalized, institutional social movements."[34] Even if they do not evolve into formalized movements, however, they can result in changes in localized communities. Thus, these musicians' actions sometimes have significant impacts on their immediate social circles or the institutions in which they work and operate. They make their choices of when and how to act strategically: sometimes choosing to stir up conflict in a space and causing discomfort; other times taking a subtler, softer approach in their activism. Their motivations for choosing one way over another will become clear in each subsequent chapter.

Similar to considering mundane actions as activism, I take seriously the artists' uses of social media as important platforms for them to organize and rally support for political actions. As Martha McCaughey has insisted for at least fifteen years, "the web is a standard tool for organizers, not a substitute for 'real' action."[35] While online movements can be strengthened and sustained also through on-the-ground grassroots support, cyberactivism allows for information to be disseminated internationally at speeds that were impossible in previous eras. It also creates solidarities that may not have been created before at all. Despite all four of these artists feeling ambivalent about social media to some extent (due to concerns about privacy, censorship, and efficacy), they use their Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts regularly as methods of

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[33] Nicholls, *An Ethics of Improvisation*, 22.
[34] Deborah G. Martin, Susan Hanson and Danielle Fontaine, "What Counts as Activism?: The Role of Individuals in Creating Change," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 3/4 (2007): 78. Emphasis original.
[35] Martha McCaughey, ed., *Cyberactivism on the Participatory Web* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 2.

communicating their dedication to various causes, calling friends and fans to action, and posting about professional engagements and upcoming concerts. They are, like many people, creating and sustaining networks and exchanging new ideas on the web.

Network Theory and Solidarity Movements

I began this project reading and thinking through network theory in an attempt to understand how and why musicians operating in different music scenes might be connected. At first, I started drawing network diagrams to trace these connections, but though I could use diagrams to clearly identify organizations, institutions, and key people the artists have in common, the same diagrams did not reveal the motivations and stories behind the connections. The deeper I got into my fieldwork, the more I realized that diagrams were not going to help me understand my overarching questions about *why* and *how* these connections formed. Instead, I found the theoretical aspects of network and community philosophy more helpful in clarifying how and why network connections are made.

One of the most common starting places for discussions about networks in art is with Howard Becker's *Art Worlds*.[36] In this seminal work, Becker dethrones the artistic genius by contextualizing the artist within a world of collective action by individuals, institutions, and governments. Aesthetic value is created through these connections, generating conventions and mobilizing people to accomplish particular artistic goals. By insisting that no artist creates in a vacuum, Becker begins the work of revealing how artists influence each other even if they do not occupy the same art world: because once an art world is constituted through the creation of conventions, people outside of the art world can look inside it and draw inspiration. Along similar lines, in *Imagined Communities*[37] Anderson argues that people feel bound together with feelings of solidarity, dedication, and patriotism around boundaries that, although constructed artificially, become real through enforcement. In short, Becker and Anderson highlight how people create perimeters around communities through sharing a sense of values and collective identity established by the group. The group constitutes itself.

Ulf Hannerz[38] builds upon Anderson by clarifying that cultures and communities are neither static nor strictly bounded, but that their borders are permeable and frequently overlap with other communities. These places of overlap are the areas that the musicians in this study share. But why and how does this overlap happen? Building further upon earlier network theory, the theorist C. Kadushin[39] argues that networks should be studied in relation to affinities, a concept known as "homophily." Homophily is a theory that states that people with like characteristics tend to be connected and influence each other. Kadushin also discusses three motivations for the creation of networks of homophily: safety, effectance (the motivation to reach out of one's comfort zone), and status-seeking. It is particularly this first motivation, safety, that helps explain why social justice advocacy is important to Malhotra, Jain, Iyer, and

[36] Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
[37] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983).
[38] Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (London: Routledge, 1996).
[39] C. Kadushin, *Understanding Social Networks: Theories, Concepts, Findings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Marya. Without equitable access to resources and opportunities, communities of color live in fear of individuals, institutions, and governments. By working in solidarity, communities of color create safety in numbers and wield greater political power. Thus, these theories of community and network-building make it easier to articulate how different art worlds with shared political solidarities connect and overlap.

But what is meant by political solidarity and collective identity? And what does it mean to work in coalition? Sociologists Francesca Polletta and James Jasper differentiate collective identity from mere interest, stating that collective identity is "a perception of a shared status of relation" that results in a person's "cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution."[40] There are a few things in this definition that are worth teasing out further. First, in using the word "perception," Polletta and Jasper, like Benedict Anderson and Ulf Hannerz, argue that these connections may be imagined, but that they become real through group reinforcement. Additionally, they clarify that collective identity is different from ideology because while an ideology can be connected to a community, a collective identity is more directly about an individual person's connection to others based upon a set of shared beliefs, ideas, or practices. The authors go on to clarify how collective identity and individual identities are in dialogue with each other: a person's personal identity is made up of numerous characteristics, some shared, and some unique, while a collective identity is about "what makes people occupying a category similar."[41] Thus, while a collective identity constitutes the category, it does not constitute the individuals who are part of the collective.

Solidarity shares some characteristics with collective identity in that people in solidarity share ideas, beliefs, or practices. Unlike collective identity, solidarity does not necessitate identifying as part of a bounded collective, whether permeable or not. Furthermore, solidarity comes with moral duties or expectations.[42] In her book *Political Solidarity*, Sally Scholz identifies three types of solidarity: social solidarity (communities made up of people with shared backgrounds or characteristics), civic solidarity (the government's responsibility to its citizens), and political solidarity. Like Scholz, I am most concerned with political solidarity. As bell hooks writes in *Feminist Theory*, political solidarity "is built on resistance struggle and emphasizes shared strengths and resources."[43] In other words, "political solidarity is a relation that forms a unity of individuals each responding to a particular situation of injustice, oppression, or social vulnerabilities."[44] Both hooks and Scholz emphasize a moral imperative in political solidarity: it is not about simply sharing similar ideas, but rather, the importance is in the action of doing something to achieve the shared goals. Malhotra, Jain, Iyer, and Marya are committed to alleviating social injustice by forming coalitions with other leftist activists; this is what makes them in solidarity with each other.

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[40] Francesca Polletta and James M. Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movements," *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001): 285.
[41] Ibid., 298.
[42] Sally J. Scholz, *Political Solidarity* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008).
[43] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1984), 62.
[44] Scholz, *Political Solidarity*, 12.

To clarify again why I am interested in political solidarity in particular, like Scholz, I acknowledge that although solidarities can overlap (in the case of this study, social and political solidarities), it is useful to look at each in isolation in order to identify exactly why particular people are connected. In the case of these four musicians, it is their shared politics and political solidarities, even more than their shared cultural heritage, which explains their similarities and the overlap in their communities. Thus, they are "unified not by shared attributes, location, or even shared interests. The unity is based on shared commitment to a cause."[45] This could be a slightly misleading statement in the context of this study, as it implies a bounded and unified movement.

In reality, the movements are multiple and loosely connected, but have shared strategies of organizing widely with a variety of groups and shared goals of achieving racial equity. They also share a general disdain for the ways White people, capitalism, and governmental institutions have attempted to tackle, or entirely ignored, systemic racism. In many ways, these minority-led organizations are continuing legacies that began over half a century ago. For example, organizations like Asians 4 Black Lives and Mujeres Unidas y Activas are primarily non-Black organizations that have actively joined forces with the Black Lives Matter movement in order to fight police brutality against Black Americans.[46] This is similar to how the Black Panthers, Latinx labor organizations, and the Asian American Movement shared information and fought in solidarity for Black civil rights in the 1960s, as discussed in detail by Laura Pulido.[47]

At the same time, contemporary social justice movements differ in that their goals are often less visible, or the means by which to achieve their goals are not universally agreed upon. For example, although Black Lives Matter aims to address "the disproportionate impact state violence has on Black lives," the most effective way to do so has not been collectively agreed upon by protestors.[48] Along similar lines, during the Occupy movement, which began in September of 2011 in New York in order to address economic disparities between the ultra-wealthy "one percent" and the "ninety-nine percent," many organizers "were slowly driven away or left frustrated by the Movement's lack of clear direction."[49] Although it was primarily police and governmental intervention that broke up Occupy encampments throughout the United States, the fact that there were no clear, unifying objectives thinned out crowds significantly before police interventions. I am not suggesting that social justice organizers during the Civil Rights Era agreed with each other about how to achieve their goals all of the time, but rather, that their goals seemed more tangible and clear. For example, during the Civil Rights Era, Black Americans were fighting for the same legal rights as non-Blacks. Today, Black Americans share the same legal rights *on paper*, but in practice, inequality persists. Changing a law is a clear, achievable goal, even if it requires a long and arduous process. Changing peoples' biases and behavior is

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[45] Scholz, *Political Solidarity*, 34.
[46] Alex Tom et al., "Black Lives Matter Allies in Change," *Race, Poverty & the Environment* 20, no. 2 (2015): 26-32.
[47] Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left*.
[48] Alicia Garza, "A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement by Alicia Garza," last updated October 7, 2014, https://marshall.ucsd.edu/student-life/Alicia-Garza-Readings.pdf.
[49] Mark Chou, "From Crisis to Crisis: Democracy, Crisis and the Occupy Movement," *Political Studies Review* 13 (2015): 47.

even more difficult because the process to do so is less transparent, particularly when many people refuse to admit they hold these biases. Malhotra, Jain, Iyer, and Marya all work within organizations and networks that attempt to force people to confront their unconscious biases in order to work toward racial justice. Their musical work, as I will show in subsequent chapters, is paramount in helping them do so.

South Asian American Music Studies

In the last decade, the number of South Asian Americans in popular media has increased significantly. Along with television and movie stars like Mindy Kaling (*The Office*, *The Mindy Project*, *Champions*), Aziz Ansari (*Parks and Recreation*, *Master of None*), and Kumail Nanjiani (*Silicon Valley*, *The Big Sick*), and comedians like Hasan Minhaj, Russell Peters, and Hari Kondabolu, South Asian American musicians have been receiving accolades in their respective (though admittedly smaller) music circles. Musicians Vijay Iyer and Rudresh Mahanthappa regularly receive critical acclaim from jazz critics. Iyer also won the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship in 2013. Hip hop drummer, rapper, and vocalist Madame Gandhi, who famously toured with British Sri Lankan rapper M.I.A., has been touring the world with a solo career since 2017. Sunny Jain's band Red Baraat receives regular airplay on National Public Radio and has toured constantly throughout the United States, Europe, and the Middle East for the last decade. Yet, despite this growing success, few studies on South Asian Americans in popular media exist. In fact, ethnographies on South Asian American musics often focus on consumers rather than creators, and almost all entirely on youth and youth culture. Very few of the studies on musicians have done in-depth profiles of particular musicians. In this section, I will discuss previous studies on South Asian Americans in popular music and how my study departs from these existing bodies of work.

Ethnographies on the South Asian American *bhangra* scenes that focus on consumers rather than performers and creators include Gregory Diethrich's work on Chicago's *bhangra* scene[50] and Sunaina Maira's 2002 book on New York's *bhangra* and hip hop scene.[51] Diethrich argues that *bhangra* music club nights transform space by creating niches and unifying South Asians in the diaspora. While he acknowledges the heterogeneity of the South Asian population, he argues that the Chicago *bhangra* scene has helped to create a more unified South Asian population. Sunaina Maira's book, *Desis in the House*, discusses the *desi* hip hop scene in New York in the 1990s through the lens of second-generation identity formation. Like Diethrich, she argues that this hip hop scene helps constitute the South Asian American community in New York, though she nuances this history more. She discusses the basic tension between South Asian-ness and American-ness that exists among many second-generation youths, and the ensuing tension of occupying an in-between "third place" (a play on Homi Bhabha's third space[52]) in US racial history. Her study does address gender, sexuality, and class to some extent, but her focus on this particular scene does not address how South Asian youth outside of the

[50] Gregory Diethrich, "Desi Music Vibes: The Performance of Indian Youth Culture in Chicago," *Asian Music* 31, no. 1 (1999): 35-61.
[51] Maira, *Desis in the House*.
[52] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004 [1991]).

scene create community. Moreover, neither Dietrich nor Maira focuses on the creators or producers of these scenes.

Falu Bakrania's ambitious work on British *bhangra* and Asian underground scenes has two parts[53]: the first of which addresses music production and artist representation, and the second of which focuses on club-goers and consumers. The two chapters in the first section examine how the largely male *bhangra* musicians negotiate masculinity in a White British cultural context, and how producers and musicians attempt to assert their individuality in an attempt to escape the burden of representing South Asian-ness writ large. The second half of the book changes gear to address women attendees of *bhangra* and Asian underground parties: the former of which are working class; the latter of which are middle class. Bakrania observes how issues of class and gender violence intersect differently in these spaces, with middle class Asian underground women facing less sexual harassment and feeling overall more freedom to express themselves beyond what they considered traditional South Asian gender roles than their working-class *bhangra* counterparts.

Texts that approach South Asian influences on popular musics include Gerry Farrell's work on jazz and Indian music,[54] Peter Lavezzoli's *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West*,[55] and Tanya Kalmanovitch's work on Indo-jazz fusion,[56] all of which approach their studies from a historical perspective. Gerry Farrell's article, "Reflecting Surfaces: the Use of Elements from Indian Music in Popular Music and Jazz," a relatively outdated survey of how Indian music was used in these genres in the 1960s and 1970s, remains one of the earlier studies on how ubiquitous Indian influences became in popular music and jazz among Black and White performers. A much longer survey along these lines is Lavezzoli's book. In this book, Lavezzoli transcribes sections of interviews with popular and jazz musicians and discusses specific recordings with Indian influences. There is no theorization or problematizing about what he calls "fusions" in this book. Addtionally, the book lacks any discussion of South Asians in the diaspora. A more nuanced historical study of Indian music and jazz can be found in Kalmonovitch's dissertation, "'Indo-Jazz Fusion': Jazz and Karnatak Music in Contact." Kalmanovitch argues for a more complex view of Indo-jazz through a consideration of Indian American musicians, the classicization of Indian music and jazz, and the dangers of simplifying Indo-jazz as merely a representation of disparate identities. Instead, she argues that Indo-jazz is a genuine manifestation of these musicians' identities and that it is also inseparable from issues of class and consumption.

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[53] Falu Bakrania, *Bhangra and Asian Underground: South Asian Music and the Politics of Belonging in Britain* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).
[54] Gerry Farrell, "Reflecting Surfaces: The Use of Elements from Indian Music in Popular Music and Jazz," *Popular Music* 7, no. 2 (1988): 189-205.
[55] Peter Lavezzoli, *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West: Bhairavi* (New York: Continuum, 2006).
[56] Tanya Kalmanovitch, *'Indo-Jazz Fusion': Jazz and Karnatak Music in Contact* (PhD diss., University of Alberta, 2009).

Finally, there are some significant studies that, like this dissertation, give more attention to individual performers in popular music. Both Nair and Balaji's 2008 volume[57] and Nitasha Sharma's book[58] focus on hip hop in South Asian America. Nair and Balaji's *Desi Rap* is a collection of essays (Part I) and profiles (Part II) of some Indian and Sri Lankan American hip hop artists. In Part I, scholars such as Vijay Prasad, Nitasha Sharma, Ajay Nair, and Sunania Maira discuss how South Asian American hip hop artists use the genre as a way to upend white dominance and draw attention to the specificities of growing up *desi*, attempting to answer the question, "How does hip-hop lend its voice to struggles in our community?"[59] Maira's article on *desi* b-boys and Bass girls casts a critical eye on the ways these *desi* youth navigated racialization, sexuality, and gender in these spaces, pointing out the sometimes uncritical ways *desi* youth in these circles adopt aspects of Black culture without acknowledging the different ways African Americans and South Asian Americans are racialized.

Nitasha Sharma's *Hip Hop Desis* focuses on men and women hip hop artists in the Bay Area South Asian American community. The book contains five chapters that address issues of the perpetual foreigner, racialized identities, the politics of appropriating Blackness, and the possibility for the construction of South Asian American hip hop as an authentic site for identity-making. Sharma argues that although the majority of these 1.5- and second-generation artists were raised in predominantly White and Asian upper and upper-middle class neighborhoods, they were drawn to hip hop as a means of grappling with issues of racism and invisibility in the United States. Several of the artists she profiles identity as activist-artists, who aim to adopt a "wider Black consciousness" by reclaiming historical (colonial) connections between South Asians and Blacks in order to highlight discrimination that South Asian Americans face. According to Sharma, these artists resist South Asian anti-Black racism by using hip hop as a mode of creating and recreating categories of *desi*-ness and Blackness, which Sharma stresses should not be confused with identifying *as* Black. Rather, *desi* hip hop artists are attempting to create space for themselves in the Black/White binary by identifying with and creating solidarity with Black hip hop culture.

While I consider all of these works valuable contributions to South Asian American music studies, my dissertation adds important new perspectives to this oeuvre. First, I depart from these studies by deeply profiling four artists operating in different music scenes. Rather than trying to draw a clear picture of how each of these scenes functions, I aim to reveal how each artist approaches the work of being a musician: How do they decide what and with whom to play? What drives them to particular projects? How do they approach collaboration? How do they approach audiences who come from different classes, or racial and ethnic backgrounds? Second, by working with four artists who have achieved some level of international recognition, I aim to draw conclusions about how and why these particular artists, who are in the minority of South Asian American artists, have achieved this level of success. Finally, I orient my study around a certain leftist racial politics: all of these artists work both within and outside of South Asian American communities to further causes for racial justice. While they do assert their brownness overtly, they do not downplay their privileges in being upper-middle class Indian

[57] Nair and Balaji, *Desi Rap*.
[58] Sharma, *Hip Hop Desis*.
[59] Nair and Balaji, *Desi Rap*, 35.

Americans. In other words, I find these artists generally aware of the pitfalls of identifying with Blackness in ways that the *desi* hip hop artists that Sharma, and Nair and Balaji profile sometimes seem to embrace uncritically. Rather than comparing their struggles to other struggling communities of color, Malhotra, Jain, Iyer, and Marya use their platforms as successful musicians to further strengthen interracial solidarities made in a contemporary, post-9/11 and Trump Era US. In order to demonstrate this, I focus on every aspect of their working lives: how they utilize social media to achieve their political, professional, and personal goals, how they promote their work in different circumstances and contexts, the cooperation and tensions that arise within their professional relationships, and their representations in popular media. In doing all of this work, I show how and why four seemingly disparate artists are representative of larger trends, both in left-leaning South Asian American communities and in interracial communities within which they organize.

Although little of the work on South Asian American music published thus far has focused on interracial collaboration, there are a few texts about the broader Asian American community creating cross-racial alliances, particularly between Asians and African Americans. In 2006, Raphael-Hernandez and Steen published *Afro-Asian Encounters*, a series of essays on the relationships between Africans and Asians in North America and the Caribbean.[60] This text engages a long and important history of encounters between Africans and Asians in the Americas. Divided into four thematic units, the authors of each essay intersperse histories of these communities in contact alongside profiles of people and groups who have combined cultures in their artistic work, including musicians. At times, their artwork has revealed tensions and conflict between groups. For example, Shannon Steen and Deborah Whaley's chapters both discuss instances of yellowface in Black American popular musics. Oliver Wang's chapter on Asian American hip hop describes how some critics have taken issue with Asian Americans performing hip hop because of the "longstanding tensions between Asian and African Americans."[61] Wang argues, however, that these artists are paving the way to open up a dialogue between two differently oppressed communities.

Artists with a more intentional engagement with Afro-Asian American politics are discussed in the edited volume *Afro Asia*.[62] The late baritone saxophonist Fred Ho and English professor Bill V. Mullen's look at stories of Asian-Black solidarity that aim to create an "anti-imperialist, insurgent identity that is no longer majority white in orientation."[63] Throughout the volume, the contributors discuss how Asian artists have collaborated with Black artists to recognize their "common oppression and struggle while acknowledging difference."[64] In other words, these musicians have a common goal of achieving equity but also understand that in order to achieve it, the different forms of oppression they have faced must be dealt with. With chapters on Mao Zedong's influence on radical Leftist movements that began during the Civil Rights Era

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[60] Heike Raphael-Hernandez and Shannon Steen, eds., *Afro-Asian Encounters: Culture, History, Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 10.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Fred Ho and Bill V. Mullen, eds., *Afro Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections between African Americans and Asian Americans* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
[63] Ibid., 2-3.
[64] Ibid., 10.

and interviews with activist-artists (including co-editor Fred Ho), the authors paint a hopeful picture about the radical possibilities of cross-racial alliances.

A careful and nuanced exploration of Black and Asian musicians in contact can be found in Tamara Roberts' 2016 book, *Resounding Afro Asia*. Roberts introduces the theoretical concept of *sono-racialization*, defined as "the organization of sound into taxonomies based on racialized conceptions of bodies."[65] In other words, Roberts uses sono-racialization to talk about how people map sound onto race, making assumptions about an artist's race simply by hearing their music. Roberts' analysis is multidimensional, similar to Raphael-Hernandez and Steen's edited volume, as they point out how these musics have resulted in conflict and hostility at times, while other times creating useful dialogues or alliances between communities. The artists themselves make conscious but seemingly contradictory decisions: to claim their identities through music (which reifies racialized notions of sound) and yet to resist these identities by engaging in "radical interracialism," or "the employment of fluid cultural production to disrupt deterministic links to race."[66] In other words, these artists' work can be messy and inconsistent, but also carefully crafted and meant to provoke.

This last point is what I find to be most useful in my own work on Malhotra, Jain, Iyer, and Marya. As will become clear in the chapters that follow, these four artists act strategically, often hyper-aware of their audience. At times, they choose to disrupt the status quo, and other times they elect not to for a variety of well-chosen reasons. Moreover, the election of Donald Trump, which took place only three months after my fieldwork began, strengthened (and in at least one case reinvigorated) their activism, serving as a major turning point and escalation of overtly political work that has continued to the present day.

Methods

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in New York City and the Bay Area from August 2016-August 2017. From late August 2016 to June 2017, I resided in New York City, where Iyer, Jain, and Malhotra lived.[67] I also traveled along the Northeast coast, to the Bay Area, and to Europe to attend some touring shows during this period. In mid June 2017, I returned to my home in the Bay Area to focus on Marya. Iyer also played several shows in San Francisco and Berkeley during that time. In early August 2017, I briefly returned to New York for Malhotra's final monthly party in New York City before her move to Cambridge, MA.

During this fieldwork period, I conducted two in-depth personal interviews with each of the four musicians, one toward the beginning of my fieldwork period; the other, toward the end. Each interview lasted anywhere from one to two hours. I also conducted interviews with several

[65] Tamara Roberts, *Resounding Afro Asia: Interracial Music and the Politics of Collaboration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 4.
[66] Roberts, *Resounding Afro Asia*, 177.
[67] Malhotra has since moved to Cambridge, MA to attend a Master's program at MIT in Comparative Media Studies. Iyer travels weekly between his home in Harlem and Cambridge, MA, where he is tenured faculty in the Department of Music at Harvard University. During the 2016-2017 school year, however, he was on a sabbatical and lived in NYC full time, except while touring.

of their regular collaborators in order to better understand their motivations and methods of collaboration. I attended several concerts, parties, and performances by each artist performing in different contexts and with different groups of musicians. With the exception of Malhotra, who did not perform publically outside of New York during my fieldwork period, I attended at least one touring show of each artist. At these concerts, I noted the setting, cost, attendance, names of other artists, and the demographics of the audiences to the best of my ability. I audio-recorded concerts in venues that gave me permission to do so.

For my archival research, I pored over interviews and reviews found in print and online publications, including audio and video interviews. Many of the print interviews were accessed online through the NYU and UC Library systems, or through the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA). I also followed and documented their social media posts, and attended academic and pre-show talks given by the artists. In April of 2017, I attended SAADA's program "Where We Belong: Artists in the Archive" in Philadelphia. This was a particularly inspiring and significant event during the course of my fieldwork because the artists featured are also invested in creating similar political solidarities through their artistic practices. I met and talked with several of these artists after the event and found that many of them have collaborated with the four artists central to this dissertation. My conclusion chapter details this event, connecting these threads.

Finally, I utilize musical analysis as a method of investigation to understand how the artists use sound as an expression of their politicized identities. Through this analysis, I begin to answer some of these questions: What music styles or genres have influenced their compositions? How do their stylistic influences and their compositions in general reflect their political solidarity? I also analyze lyrics and titles when relevant. Much of the music analysis I have done is descriptive, although I do utilize some transcription analysis when relevant.

Throughout the dissertation, I point to archival records that either support or contradict their claims or actions. These interviews, concerts, musical analyses, and archival research help connect the dots between what the artists say they believe, their public personas, their musical sounds, and the histories that inform their social justice and solidarity work.

The Map

Each of the next four chapters, beginning with Chapter 2, is oriented around one of the four artists in this study. I begin the chapters with a brief biography of each artist, emphasizing their music education and their cultural backgrounds. I tell these stories as they were told to me in personal interviews. After the biographical sections, I discuss how each artist became interested in activism, how 9/11 shaped or reshaped their senses of racial identity and politics, and how this has manifested differently in their musics. Throughout each chapter, I refer to the people, institutions, and organizations that the artists are affiliated with in order to emphasize the connections they share.

In Chapter Two, I profile Rekha Malhotra, known professionally as DJ Rekha, by tracing the history of the monthly party she threw in New York City from 1997-2017, known as Basement Bhangra. Malhotra's story is one of reinvigoration. When the party began, it was

known for being an activist space for young, queer South Asian Americans. In 2016 when I first met Malhotra and attended a party myself, her drive for doing political work had been waning for a few years. After the 2016 election, however, Malhotra was again reminded of the importance of doing political solidarity work at Basement Bhangra. This lasted through the final party, which took place at New York City's famous concert series Summerstage.

Chapter Three follows the life and career of drummer and *dhol* player Sunny Jain. Jain's political work is the least obvious of the four musicians in this study, but his main musical project, Red Baraat, represents a utopic, though admittedly male-centered, vision of political solidarity. In this chapter, I argue that Jain's leftist politics, and the ways they have manifested in his musical practices, are deeply influenced by his religious upbringing as a Jain. More specifically, the Jain concept of *anekāntavāda*, which literally translates to "many-sidedness," is directly connected to Jain's own commitment to diversity, non-violence, and interracial political solidarity in both his musical life and his personal life.

Chapter Four concentrates on pianist Vijay Iyer. I argue that Iyer's insistence on being an "undeniable presence" in the jazz and experimental music landscapes is part of an overtly political agenda and a statement of solidarity with other people of color in these circles. I wrote about Iyer previously in my master's thesis, titled "It's Not Fusion: Hybridity in the Music of Vijay Iyer and Rudresh Mahanthappa." In that work, I discussed how the two title musicians construct multifaceted Indian American identities in their music. I oriented my study around postcolonial theory, diaspora studies, and socio-anthropological works on second-generation immigrant identity-formation. I also used traditional musicological analyses and transcriptions of their music to support my argument. While identity-formation is still an important aspect of this dissertation, in Chapter Four I focus more on Iyer's politics and how these politics have shaped his collaborative decisions, his composition, and his work as an academic. My previous work on Iyer, done in 2012, was more of a survey. In this study, I primarily look at his post-2012 life, during which Iyer has gained more national and international attention since being awarded a MacArthur Fellowship and obtaining a tenured professorship in the Department of Music at Harvard University, both in 2013. Iyer has always been political to some degree, but in this chapter, I explore how his work has grown to be more explicitly and unapologetically political in recent years.

Finally, I write about Rupa Marya. The frontwoman of the band Rupa and the April Fishes, Marya also practices general medicine and teaches residents at University of California San Francisco Medical Center. In this chapter, I explore how Marya navigates two successful careers along with motherhood and her voluntary work as a community organizer. I argue that these seemingly disconnected vocations are actually informed by one another, and moreover, that they are extensions of Marya's activist lifestyle. In other words, it will become clear that nearly every decision that Marya makes in both her personal and professional life supports the same goals: to achieve racial justice and to contribute to the breakdown of neoliberal capitalism.

All four of these artists describe both 9/11 as a significant turning point in recognizing and understanding South Asian racialization in the United States. In the concluding chapter, then, I draw more explicit connections between the four artists and the activist work of other South Asian American artists of their generation, exploring how comprehending their racial identity

more fully led to their political solidarity work in music. Moreover, given that my fieldwork period overlapped with the 2016 election and the inauguration of Donald Trump, I describe how the aftermath of this election bolstered South Asian American artists' work as activists and advocates. Through this work, I offer a different approach to studying musicians by unfolding the range of networks that these musicians operate between and within. My study reveals the complexity and multifaceted nature of musicians' work, particularly for people for whom politics play a central role. Thus, my project will help describe how these second-generation Indian American musicians navigate their politics in sight, sound, and action, and the roles they play in working toward a more racially just world.

Chapter 2: *Your Attention Please*: Racial Politics at DJ Rekha's Basement Bhangra, 1997-2017

Prologue

It's the night of January 7, 2016 and I descend the stairs leading to the basement of Le Poisson Rouge in Greenwich Village. I'm accompanied by two old college friends who live in New York, and I'm thankful they agreed to come despite having no idea what they're in for. I'm as clueless as they are. I'm here to check out the legendary party, Basement Bhangra, in preparation for my fieldwork beginning later in the year. Since the first event of the year coincides with my visit, it seemed prudent to familiarize myself with it prior to the start of fieldwork.

We walk into the room just after 7:30pm, the listed start time. The long rectangular room has a small stage and deejay booth on the short end opposite from where we enter. To our right is a bar running the length of the sidewall. It's dark, and aside from the blonde woman spinning electronic dance versions of current Top 40 pop songs in the deejay booth (whom I later learn is DJ Petra) and the bartenders drying glasses with white dishtowels, the place is completely empty. We're early.

We grab drinks and sit down on the built-in benches opposite the bar to chat and wait for the rest of the crowd to appear. A couple of people trickle in over the next half an hour and begin ordering drinks and chatting by the bar. By 9:00, a steadier stream of people begins to arrive and by 9:15, a crowd of a hundred mostly South Asian people has amassed. It is around this time that DJ Rekha finally takes the stage and welcomes everyone to Basement Bhangra, blasting the "Basement Bhangra Anthem"[68] from the speakers. A screen behind the stage projects visuals, mostly *bhangra* music videos, to go along with the music.

In addition to not being a club-goer in general, I've never danced *bhangra*. I grew up among a relatively traditional South Indian Brahmin Hindu community in Los Angeles. In my community, doing Indian dance meant training in the Hindu classical dance form *bharatanatyam*. I didn't even do that as a child, preferring to study jazz, tap, and ballet like my non-*desi*[69] friends. I frequently joke with other *desis* that South Indians don't dance or do anything that could be misconstrued as fun, since social dancing and drinking were considered taboo at my childhood social gatherings. Although I've seen *bhangra* dance troupes perform at various festivals and on college campuses throughout my life, I've never attempted the dance myself. In other words, I feel at least as out of place in this environment as the non-South Asian friends who accompany me. In fact, my insecurities are possibly more acute than theirs since, in my mind, I look like I should know what I'm doing because I'm South Asian.

To my relief, as "Basement Bhangra Anthem" ends, DJ Rekha calls a dance teacher from Ajna Dance Company (https://www.ajnadance.com/), a New York-based Indian dance company and education organization, to the stage to lead the crowd in a short *bhangra* lesson. I soon learn

[68] DJ Rekha, "Basement Bhangra Anthem," *DJ Rekha Presents Basement Bhangra*, Koch Records KOC-CD-4180, 2007, compact disc.
[69] A colloquial term used to refer to people in the South Asian diaspora.

that dance lessons are a staple part of Basement Bhangra, meant to welcome newcomers and foster a sense of community.[70] The crowd, consisting of around a hundred people primarily of South Asian descent, forms several short parallel lines facing the stage, and we carefully follow the teacher's step-by-step instructions. There are a few other non-South Asians present, mostly White, with a couple of East Asians as well. Even the experienced dancers watch closely and imitate the steps. We practice each new step silently at first, and then with music, pounding our feet low into the ground while holding our bent arms overhead replicating the characteristic *bhangra* shoulder shrug. The lesson lasts only fifteen minutes, but it's sufficient to learn several of the most basic steps.

After the lesson, my friends and I feel confident enough in the basics to stay on the dance floor. We form a small circle, laughing at each other's attempts to copy the proficient dancers around us. Soon, people begin asking us to join in on their dance circles as they teach us new, more complex steps. Everyone is friendly and welcoming, and I'm surprised at how conducive the environment is to learning. There are people showing off their expert moves, but the crowd is supportive rather than competitive. Even the experts seem eager to help others learn. Although the majority of the most boisterous dancers are turban-wearing Punjabi Sikh men, even some of the non-South Asians seem to know how to dance *bhangra* well. This doesn't entirely surprise me, however, since I have seen many non-South Asians on college *bhangra* and Bollywood dance teams in California. Although I don't confirm this with them, I presume they learned *bhangra* by participating on similar teams.

The light-hearted and celebratory atmosphere helps dampen my insecurities as the night progresses, and I'm able to relax. After a couple of hours of dancing, we decide to leave. The party is still going strong, but it's nearly midnight and both of my friends have to work early the next morning. I leave feeling excited to learn more about how DJ Rekha created and sustained this party for twenty years.

Introduction

Bhangra deejay and producer Rekha Malhotra, better known as DJ Rekha was born in 1971 in London and raised primarily in Westbury, Long Island. She also spent a few of her early years in Queens, NY and New Delhi. When she began Basement Bhangra in 1997 – Basement for short – Malhotra had already been working professionally as a deejay for a couple of years, spinning and mixing the latest *bhangra* and hip hop tracks at parties and clubs across New York. At Basement, she would be the headlining deejay, bringing in new hip hop and *bhangra* deejays and musicians to perform earlier sets. The party grew in size over the next couple of years, and by the year 2000, young South Asian Americans throughout the Tri-State area traveled to attend the monthly event. Malhotra slowly but surely became a legend in the South Asian American community because of the party, seen as one of only a few people responsible for popularizing *bhangra* in the US After twenty years of hosting the monthly party at clubs in SoHo and Greenwich Village, Malhotra decided to end Basement Bhangra in August 2017 at New York's Summerstage in Central Park. A large, free outdoor party was the perfect swan song for the event that defined her young adulthood and launched her career as an internationally acclaimed deejay.

[70] Rekha Malhotra, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, April 19, 2017.

In this chapter, I trace the political and social history of Basement Bhangra over its twenty years, with special focus on its final year. I begin with a brief history of the formation of contemporary *bhangra* in the UK, discussing how South Asian racialization in Britain informed and changed the ways *bhangra* was perceived, created, and consumed in the United States. I go on to show how Basement Bhangra began as a radical space for South Asians to openly consume and perform *bhangra* and organize freely around progressive political issues, but eventually turned into a broader community space for first- and second-generation South Asian Americans to gather and celebrate their South Asian-ness. I explore how the party became less overtly political due to Malhotra's frustration with changing audiences and venues, and to her feeling burned out and overwhelmed by contemporary racial tensions within and outside of the Basement Bhangra community. In its final year, which also coincided with my fieldwork year, however, the party's leftist political atmosphere was revived. Donald Trump's election reinvigorated Malhotra's desire to use the party as a space to push a progressive political agenda and stress the importance of creating solidarity between South Asian Americans and other oppressed minority communities. Ultimately, I argue that from 1997 to 2017, Malhotra created and maintained Basement Bhangra as a safe space for South Asian Americans in the tri-state area to create community, allowing them to build solidarities with each other, support progressive causes, and engage in social justice oriented conversations in the face of changing US racial politics.

***Bhangra*'s Transnational Transformations**

Bhangra music and dance history dates back over two thousand years to Punjabi harvest and birth ceremonies and rituals.[71] It continued to evolve and change as many Punjabi South Asians from present-day India and Pakistan settled in the United Kingdom after working on behalf of the UK during the World Wars, making them eligible to settle there.[72] During British colonialism, Punjabis were stereotyped by White British leaders as particularly good soldiers, possibly because the Punjab region, due to its location in the northwest straddling India and Pakistan, has been invaded throughout its history.[73] Today, Punjabis make up nearly half of the South Asian population in the UK.[74] Punjabis who settled in the UK started families, and with them they brought their traditions, including musical traditions like *bhangra*, which they soon began combining with western popular traditions.

Contemporary *bhangra* music emerged primarily in London among Punjabi British communities who combined Punjabi folk music styles with hip hop, reggae, dancehall, and techno beginning in the mid-to-late twentieth century, and then began to travel throughout the South Asian diaspora and back to the subcontinent. Most of these *bhangra* musicians were first-

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[71] Anjali Gera Roy, *Bhangra Moves: From Ludhiana to London and Beyond* (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2010), 11.
[72] Kaveri Qureshi et al., "Migration, Transnationalism, and Ambivalence: The Punjab-United Kingdom Linkage," in *Migration and Transformation: Multi-Level Analysis of Migrant Transnationalism*, ed. Pirkko Pitkänen, Ahmet Içduygu, and Deniz Sert (Basel, Switzerland: Springer, 2012).
[73] Ibid., 15.
[74] Ibid.

and second-generation Indian and Pakistani immigrants reconciling their experiences as British Asians through the creation, reinvention, and recombining of music genres. Sound-wise, contemporary *bhangra* has two elements present in nearly all *bhangra* songs: the inclusion of the *dhol* drum playing a variation of the bhangra *cāl* rhythm below, which is performed with a swing feel,[75] and Punjabi language lyrics. However, lyrics in other languages, particularly English, are often interspersed within songs.

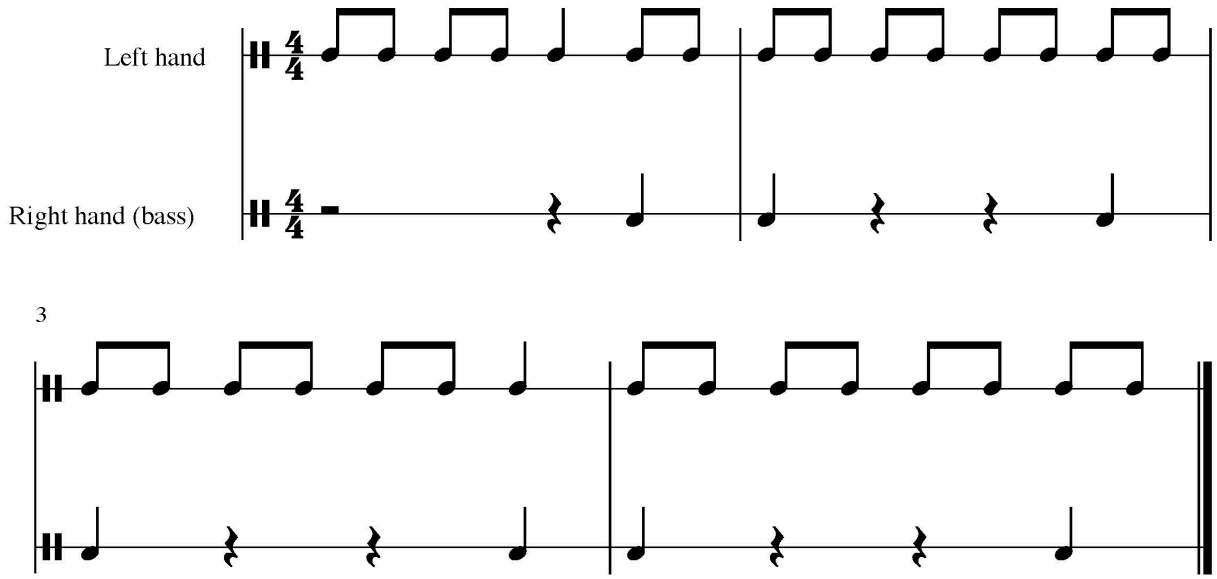

Figure 2.1 Dhol drum cāl rhythm.[76]

Other than these two relatively stable elements, *bhangra* songs vary in style significantly. New songs and remixes are frequently influenced by and mixed with contemporary Western popular dance songs as well as popular Bollywood songs. The genre continuously evolves. In fact, *bhangra* scholar Anjali Gera Roy warns us not to accept the "originary myth" of *bhangra*, arguing that it can no longer be understood as a Punjabi music that traveled outward from its ancestral home to develop into its contemporary form; rather, *bhangra* has now traveled both from the Punjab region and back to it, with multiple iterations in different regions, including other parts of South Asia.[77] In other words, it can now be understood as a transnational music with global flows throughout the world.

Dance and visuals have always been an integral part of *bhangra*, and like the music, they have developed and changed over time and in different locations, incorporating elements of other dance and visual styles, especially hip hop.[78] The dance involves the coordination of athletic jumps and upward leg movements along with downward shoulder shrugs and hand movements. The contemporary dance is based on Punjabi folk harvest dances, and songs are often composed

[75] Gibb Stuart Schreffler, *Signs of Separation: Dhol in Punjabi Culture* (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2010).
[76] Transcription by author.
[77] Anjali Gera Roy, *Bhangra Moves*, 13.
[78] Ibid., 26.

with accompanying music videos in mind.[79] Variations in the movements are gendered, although it is common to see women in clubs perform traditionally masculine styles of the dance (the opposite is rarely true).

Early studies of *bhangra* by White music scholars like Les Back[80] and R. Baumann[81] frequently reduced *bhangra*'s function to a continuation of Punjabi cultural practices in Britain, but as numerous South Asian scholars like Sanjay Sharma and Falu Bakrania have pointed out, British Asian[82] youth were navigating complex racial politics through the creation and consumption of a new, distinctly British *bhangra*. Sharma explains:

> The Asian dance musics of Bhangra … represent a medium through which the non-exhaustive identifications of 'British and Black'… *and* 'Asian' become politically available to Asian youth. These musics enable Asian youth to articulate and deploy a sense of 'Asianness' that is not necessarily in opposition to notions of being Black, and, though more problematically, even British. These dance musics may, then, act as a site for the *translation* between disaporic Asian, Black and British identifications.[83]

Sharma's point is that British Asian youth were often racialized similarly to Black (African) British youth by dominant White British culture, though they came from remarkably different backgrounds. Although both communities grew as a result of British colonial projects, the Black British population was primarily the result of the transatlantic slave trade, while the British Asian community was the result of British occupation and colonial rule in South Asia.[84] Moreover, there were major cultural differences between the communities, including differences in dominant religious practices, languages, and food. So, although the White British did not always distinguish the differences between the two,[85] Black and Asian British people did not always

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[79] Ibid., 97.
[80] Les Back, *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture* (London: University College London Press, 1996).
[81] Gerd Baumann, "The Re-Invention of Bhangra: Social Change and Aesthetic Shifts in a Punjabi Music in Britain," *World of Music* 32, no. 2 (1990): 81-98.
[82] In the UK, Asian is most often used synonymously to mean South Asian, in contrast to the US, in which Asian most often implies East Asian, to the exclusion of South Asians and Southeast Asians. Thus, I use British Asian to mean "British South Asian," unless otherwise specified.
[83] Sanjay Sharma, "Noisy Asians or 'Asian Noise'?", in *Dis-Orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music*, ed. Sanjay Sharma, John Hutnyk, and Ashwani Sharma (London: Zed Books, 1996), 40.
[84] Ray Costello, *Black Liverpool: The Early History of Britain's Oldest Black Community 1730-1918* (Liverpool: Picton Press, 2001).
[85] It is important to note that there were significant exceptions to this during British colonial rule in East Africa. Starting in the late-nineteenth century, for example, South Asians were brought to Uganda by the British, where they were often treated better than Black East Africans. This eventually led to significant tension between East Africans and Ugandan South Asians, eventually resulting in the expulsion of South Asians from Uganda in 1972 by then-President Idi Amin. For more on this, see Thomas P. Ofcansky, *Uganda: Tarnished Pearl of Africa* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), among others.

identify with each other closely on a cultural level. At the same time, being similarly racialized in Britain meant that they did share some immigrant experiences, such as being excluded from White spaces. British Asians navigated many of these feelings of identification and of difference through the creation of new dance musics like British *bhangra*. *Bhangra*, then, was about more than crafting an identity as different from their parents or their non-Asian peers. Bakrania makes a similar point, arguing that early writings on this genre viewed *bhangra* dance nights as spaces created for South Asian British youth to escape their parents' traditions and oppressive expectations. In reality, she writes, *bhangra* nights were created after Asian youth were denied entry into spaces for White people.[86] *Bhangra*, then, was a tool used for making space to grapple with racial tension, cultural misunderstandings, forming solidarities, and fighting against White hegemony in British society.

British colonialism in South Asia officially ended in 1947, only a couple of decades before British *bhangra* began to blossom. Although there were small waves of South Asian immigration to the UK prior to World War II, the first large scale immigration to Britain began post-war. As Bakrania and sociologist Avtar Brah have written, from the beginning, South Asian immigration was colored by Britain's colonial past.[8788] Populations arriving immediately post-war were mostly working class immigrants from rural parts of contemporary North India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Many were Punjabi Sikhs. In the 1960s and 1970s, South Asian immigrants who had settled in former British colonies in Africa also began to migrate to the UK in large waves, although these immigrants were mostly middle class. Consequently, South Asian British populations in the mid to late twentieth centuries were diverse and socially stratified.

Racism was enacted through official governmental policies such as the denial of citizenship for non-White immigrants and through xenophobic cultural attitudes of White British citizens directed toward brown immigrants. Immigrants were also subject to violent and nonviolent attacks. Working class British Asians began organizing almost immediately, forming the Indian Workers Association in the 1950s to fight for workers rights and fight against White supremacist groups who carried out violent attacks on British Asian individuals. Other brown-led leftist anti-racist movements emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, and Sharma[89] argues that the emergence of British *bhangra* must be understood in this context. In fact, *bhangra*'s fusion with hip hop was not simply the result of hip hop's rising popularity at the time, but largely grew out of feelings of solidarity with Black hip hop artists in the face of systemic oppression and racism.

South Asian American racialization, as discussed in detail in the first chapter of this dissertation, shares some similarities with British Asian racialization, but also some significant differences. Firstly, the United States was never a colonial power in South Asia. Following this, widespread South Asian immigration to the United States began later than in Britain, partially

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[86] Falu Bakrania, *Bhangra and Asian Underground: South Asian Music and the Politics of Belonging in Britain* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 2.
[87] Ibid., 10.
[88] Avtar Brah, "The 'Asian' in Britain," in *A Postcolonial People: South Asians in Britain*, ed. N. Ali, V.S. Kalra, and S. Sayyid (London: Hurst and Company, 2006).
[89] Sanjay Sharma, John Hutnyk, and Ashwani Sharma, eds., *Dis-Orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music* (London: Zed Books, 1996).

due to exclusionary immigration policies in the US that lasted through the mid-1960s, but also because of Britain's colonial history on the subcontinent. Additionally, most new visas[90] were issued to highly skilled and highly educated South Asians, so a larger number of South Asian immigrants in the US had the potential for upward mobility than their British counterparts. By the time these immigrants began their families in the 1970s and 1980s, South Asian Americans had begun organizing along with other Asian American groups for recognition and rights in the post-Civil Rights Era. As Moon Ho-Jung has written,[91] Asian Americans had been pitted against African Americans since at least the Civil War, and it intensified in the late twentieth century as highly educated new Asian immigrants obtained middle and upper class statuses throughout North American cities.

This background is necessary to understand some of the basic contextual differences between *bhangra* in the U.K and in the United States. By the 1980s, *bhangra* had begun to make its way to the US through a thriving cultural practice of exchanging tapes between Punjabis in the UK and America.[92] It grew in popularity through this decade, and by the 1990s, *bhangra* was commonly played at South Asian American festivals and weddings throughout the United States.

In the UK, treatment of South Asians mirrored treatment of the Black British population in some ways. They shared a history of recently ended colonialism, exclusionary laws and cultural practices, and suffered exposure to damaging derogatory language.[93] In the United States, African American and South Asian American histories diverge significantly. Although South Asian Americans have faced racist exclusionary and segregationist policies, they never directly suffered enslavement and genocide at the hands of the United States government. The largely White-run US media and government have used incomplete data to paint Asian Americans as an example of how any minority group has the potential to be successful, ignoring historical facts that have led to Asian American successes and the institutionalized forms of racism that still impact African Americans. South Asian American and African American populations largely remain segregated from each other throughout US American cities. This is not to say that segregation among Black British and Asian British populations does not exist, but rather that their histories and forms of oppression are more closely aligned than between African Americans and South Asian Americans. There is also a longer history of forming Black-Asian solidarities to fight systemic racism in Britain.

British Asians chose to combine hip hop, reggae, dancehall, and Punjabi folk music to create contemporary *bhangra* largely because of their identification with the oppression of black artists in the diaspora.[94] Although it first developed into its contemporary style in Punjabi British

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[90] By new, I am referring to non-family related immigration.
[91] Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2006).
[92] Rekha Malhotra, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, September 26, 2016.
[93] For example, the word "Paki" is a deeply insulting derogatory term for South Asians in the UK, akin to the word n****r. While anti-Islamic rhetoric has become commonplace in post-9/11 America, there is no single historically laden term for South Asians in the United States.
[94] Sarah Hankins, "So Contagious: Hybridity and Subcultural Exchange in Hip-Hop's Use of Indian Samples," *Black Music Research Journal* 31, no. 2 (2011): 193-208.

communities, it "became an increasingly popular and widespread genre because a heterogeneous population of young South Asians used 'pure Bhangra'—the music and dance of certain groups of Punjabi Sikjs—as both a cultural and sonic *sample*."[95] Minority communities are often understood as homogeneous by the dominant culture, and in the case of British South Asians, many adopted cultural symbols, customs, and artistic modes of production of Punjabi British culture in the face of this homogenization, forming coalitions based on shared oppression and marginalization. *Bhangra* was one element of this.[96]

As it traveled to the United States through tape culture, it also changed context, largely being consumed by middle class Punjabi Americans. Many Punjabi immigrants in the United States had ties in the UK, and it is partially through these familial connections that *bhangra* gained popularity in South Asian American social circles. By the early 2000s, *bhangra* had become a vital part of South Asian American culture, with dance troupes cropping up at universities across the country. Unlike its UK context, however, *bhangra* in the US was recreated and consumed with a less oppositional stance, since overall, South Asian Americans were seen as less problematic than British Asians. This was due to at least two major factors: the generally high education levels of post-1965 South Asians which gave them upward economic and social mobility, and the differing political histories between South Asia and Britain, their former colonizer, and the United States. Thus, just as Roy has described, as *bhangra* moved, it took on new meanings as it developed in new locations.[97]

Malhotra as Activist Deejay

Malhotra's neighborhood in Westbury, Long Island was a diverse suburb just northeast of Queens. According to her, wealthy families, predominantly consisting of the non-black population in the area, sent their children to private schools. Malhotra, who grew up middle class, attended public school and was surrounded by predominantly black students during her primary and secondary educations. By contrast, her home life consisted of a tight-knit community of Punjabi Americans from West Delhi, her parents' home city. These early experiences among black American and Punjabi American communities shaped Malhotra's views on race and racialization in the US.

Malhotra describes herself as a failed musician, citing little parental pressure and self-discipline to master playing any particular instrument. However, as a self-professed "musical sponge,"[98] she consumed music enthusiastically. Growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, she listened to everything from her parents' Bollywood 8-track cassettes to 1980s New Wave and Top 40 radio. She also developed a deep fondness for The Beatles, The Police, Prince, and early New York hip hop.

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[95] Hankins, "So Contagious," 198. It is unclear here exactly what Hankins considers to be "pure Bhangra" given what I have discussed in this chapter: that *bhangra* has not been a stable category of music aside from having Punjabi lyrics and a *dhol* drum.
[96] Food is another major one. Punjabi food has become synonymous with "Indian food" almost universally outside of Asia.
[97] Roy, *Bhangra Moves*.
[98] Rekha Malhotra, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, September 26, 2016.

In her early teenage years, Malhotra's interest in *bhangra* began after her mother returned from a trip to London with a *bhangra* cassette tape from the UK. On this tape, Malkit Singh's *Up Front*, Malhotra heard remixes of popular Punjabi folk songs she had known since childhood, and she was immediately intrigued by the idea of deejaying. Along with some fellow teenaged cousins, Malhotra formed a deejay crew and they began taking any gig they could get, mostly consisting of parties in her local Punjabi community. She continued deejaying as she went to college and approached early adulthood, soon hosting *bhangra* and hip hop nights in New York City clubs. She completed her BA in Urban Studies at City University of New York, Queens College, and in 1997, she began Basement Bhangra at S.O.B.'s (Sounds of Brazil) in downtown Manhattan, "the first Indian remix music night to be featured monthly on the calendar of a Manhattan club—and the first to be hosted by a woman deejay."[99] Her vision was simple: to create a space where young Punjabi Americans could party once a month without feeling stigmatized or ostracized, and where they could dance to *bhangra*.

Rekha's own history of political activism is closely tied to growing political activism among South Asians in North America, and particularly in New York, throughout the 1990s. This history is explored in depth in a volume on Asian American community building, one chapter of which includes an interview conducted by Anantha Sudhakhar with Malhotra and other New York-based South Asian artists like Malhotra's long-time collaborator and MIT Professor, Vivek Bald.[100] During this interview, Malhotra reveals that her interest in activism began with an internship with in 1992, but that a turning point was attending the civil trial for the attackers of Kaushal Saran in 1993. Saran was a victim of the so-called Dotbusters, a hate group made up primarily of White men in Northern New Jersey who carried out several dozen beatings and murders aimed at South Asians between 1987-1993. Saran was beaten into a coma in an unprovoked attack in 1987, and although he partially recovered from the incident, his brain damage left him unable to remember the event.[101] Malhotra was invited by her activist friends to flood the courtroom during one of the civil trials with members of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund and Indian Youth Against Racism (later renamed Youth Against Racism, or YAR) in a show of support for Saran. At the trial, she met other activist-minded *desis*, including two women civil rights lawyers, and she was "blown away" by the fact that there were *desi* women with what would be considered respectable jobs who were actually radical-minded and doing social justice work.[102]

Malhotra and Bald insist that historicization is necessary in order to understand why so much new organizing cropped up in 1990s New York City among South Asian Americans. As Malhotra notes, the second-generation children who were born shortly after the 1965 immigration changes were coming of age during this time. Vivek expands:

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[99] Maira, *Desis in the House*, 30.

[100] Anantha Sudhakhar, "Crafting Community: South Asian American Arts and Activism in 1990s New York City," in *Local/Express: Asian American Arts and Community 90s NYC*, ed. Curtis Chin, Terry Hong, and Parag Rejendra Khandar (Crownsville, MD: The Asian American Literary Review, 2013).

[101] Because of Saran's inability to remember the attack, his attackers were acquitted on all charges.

[102] Sudhakar, "Crafting Community," 162.

> At the same time, there were groups of more recently arrived working class immigrants—taxi drivers, domestic workers—who were reaching their own critical mass and beginning to engage in different forms of organizing. And there was a group of folks who had come to the U.S. in their 20s or 30s…who brought a politics that was grounded in ongoing struggles on the subcontinent, but who were simultaneously developing a set of political commitments in the U.S.[103]

As Bald points out, the kinds of South Asians immigrating in the 1990s began to change, moving from more highly skilled and educated South Asians to the arrival of more working-class South Asians. These people began to interact and form community with each other. Bald and Malhotra led some of these efforts with the creation of Mutiny (another South Asian-music focused party night that lasted for several years) and Basement Bhangra. They began to experience more racism as South Asian American communities grew, and it became clear that they needed community organizations that spoke to their needs.

Although Basement Bhangra became a less overtly politicized space in its final years, Malhotra herself never stopped being involved in community work on some level, but tended to work mainly in invitational settings. She continued to play benefits for organizations like Sakhi (a nonprofit providing resources for South Asian women suffering from domestic violence), Youth Against Racism, and the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association (SALGA). However, the organizing in her own events became more strategic and less frequent because of feeling overwhelmed by the expectation of keeping up with politics. In our interviews, she told me that she lost energy as she grew older and her career took off; she found it difficult to sustain her work as an activist and stay informed. Moreover, she grew overwhelmed at having to continually explain to the changing crowds how some of her priorities differed from theirs. As Basement Bhangra grew, the South Asian American crowd attending became more upper-middle class, and less activist-oriented. Unlike Malhotra, many of them had never been exposed to black culture, and they did not understand the historical and sociopolitical experiences of black people in America. So, Basement Bhangra was creating space for South Asians, but Malhotra began to question what was at stake. She states:

> I did see in our community the emergence of a lot of good things and a lot of problematic things. The good things were that there are organizations that either formed after [9/11] or had more of a path and fight to work on behalf of South Asians in different aspects, but [I] also felt they were opportunistic and narrow-minded, and it was at the expense of African Americans or other people of color…I think it's really hard in this country to understand how differently people live in different communities. I think the best thing my parents ever did was move to Westbury, Long Island, 'cause I don't think I would've understood if I had followed a more typical path of growing up around *desis* or moving to a White neighborhood…Maybe at some point like most people, understanding how brilliant hip hop is and having an affinity to the music but not really understanding anything about the black experience.[104]

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[103] Sudhakar, "Crafting Community," 168.
[104] Rekha Malhotra, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, September 26, 2016.

Thus, as she grew tired of explaining these differences to South Asians, she slowly moved away from discussing interminority politics in the Basement Bhangra space. Instead, the space became more focused on South Asian American-ness, which was still badly needed because of sustained xenophobia against AMEMSA (Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, South Asian) communities by non-AMEMSA Americans and the United States government. As SAALT (South Asian Americans Leading Together) found, even a decade after 9/11, during the supposedly post-race Obama era, hate violence directed toward AMEMSA groups, which were primarily the result of Islamophobia, continued to rise.[105] In this political environment Basement Bhangra, at the very least, continued to serve as a place where South Asian Americans could feel not only welcomed, but also celebrated, without being singled out.

This meant, however, putting Malhotra's more progressive coalitional politics on hold, and being less overtly critical of South Asian Americans who identified with black American cultural production ahistorically. In "Desis Reprazent: Bhangra Remix and Hip Hop in New York City,"[106] Sunaina Maira grapples with the question of the potential problems with South Asian American identification with hip hop. Citing Mary Waters, Maira discusses how the consumption of African American cultural production is often the result of defiance toward dominant White culture. She asks, "Does this gesture of defiance figure in young Indian Americans' identification with hip hop in New York? And how is this ostensibly oppositional stance related to other aspects of this subculture's racial and cultural politics?"[107] She goes on to discuss how although defiance does play a small role in the appeal of hip hop for young Indian American men, their consumption and performance of hip hop style and music is primarily due to their understanding of hip hop as hyper-masculine and "cool." In other words, Malhotra's concern that many South Asian Americans were engaging in hip hop culture without understanding its context was legitimate. Even more troubling is how, even as they engage with hip hop culture, antiblack sentiment remains strong within South Asian communities throughout the world.

South Asian Antiblackness and Caste

Antiblackness in South Asian communities is pervasive, and both directly and indirectly connected to historical and contemporary caste relations on the subcontinent and in the diaspora. Antiblackness manifests in many overt and subtle ways, such as upper-caste parents telling South Asian children not to go out into the sun for fear that they may get too dark, and the proliferation of skin lightening creams like Fair and Lovely.[108] In the United States, South Asian Americans have attempted to attain Whiteness, or something close to it, without acknowledging the harm it has done to other communities of color, particularly African Americans. As Vijay Prashad

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[105] "Under Suspicion, Under Attack," South Asian Americans Leading Together, accessed July 21, 2019, http://saalt.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/SAALT_report_full_links.pdf.
[106] Sunaina Maira, "Desis Reprazent: Bhangra Remix and Hip Hop in New York City," *Postcolonial Studies: Culture, Politics, Economy* 1, no. 3 (1998): 357-70.
[107] Ibid., 360.
[108] Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "Yearning for Lightness: Transnational Circuits in the Marketing and consumption of Skin Lighteners," *Gender and Society* 22, no. 3 (2008): 281-302. See also Shankar and Subish 2016, Rondilla and Spickard 2007, Hussein 2010, and many others.

discusses in *The Karma of Brown Folk*,[109] *desis* aim to achieve based on White definitions of success in part because of antiblackness. By realizing these standards of success, South Asian Americans not only raise their own statuses, but also widen the hierarchical gap between themselves and black people, which is seen as desirable.

Prashad's analysis, although keen and accurate, does not delve deep enough into some of the historical context necessary to understand how ingrained antiblackness is in South Asian culture, both on the subcontinent and in the diaspora. In her article about Annu Palakunnathu Matthew's photography essay, "Two Indians," which juxtaposes photographs of early South Asian American immigrants with similar photographs of Native Americans, Shaista Patel writes that, although antiblackness is globally structural, South Asian antiblackness has roots in the centuries-old caste system.[110] Although the caste system initially began as a hierarchical system meant to police boundaries based on occupation, casteism went on to have implications about skin color, and darker-skinned people became associated with being lower-caste. She uses studies of *bhangra* music to bolster her overall argument that South Asian American identification with blackness must be critiqued through a lens of systemic casteism.

Patel points out that while South Asian American consumers of *bhangra* and hip hop often discuss resistance to the model minority stereotypes through the adoption of black cultural influences, the lyrics in the music frequently refer to *Jat* pride. *Jat* is a particularly complex and fraught term that originally referred to a group of Sikh agricultural landowners in the Punjab region. Sikhism is one of the most common religions in the region, and although one of the tenets of the religion is to be free of caste, Surinder Jodhka,[111] Joyce Pettigrew,[112] and other Sikh scholars argue that functionally, Sikhs have a hierarchical system that operates in parallel with the Hindu caste system. Patel argues that although *Jats* do not share the same status as Brahmins, "their domination as a cultivator caste in Punjab's agrarian economy positions them above all other castes," and, as a result, "Jat [is] synechdochically serving as the signifier not only of Sikh but also of Punjabi identity."[113] Patel contends that reinforcing higher-caste pride through the insistence on *Jat* pride in *bhangra* lyrics dehumanizes lower caste people, and therefore reinforces antiblackness.

Patel goes on to reference Dalit-American activist, Thenmozhi Soundarajan. In a 2015 interview, Soundarajan clarifies that caste operates in South Asian American circles so deeply that even non-Hindus are complicit. She states:

> Today, upper-caste social locators have become the norm for what is seen as South Asian culture, when it is in fact Savarna [upper-caste Hindu] culture…For most South Asians in

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[109] Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
[110] Shaista Patel, "Complicating the Tale of 'Two Indians': Mapping 'South Asian' Complicity in White Settler Colonialism Along the Axis of Caste and Anti-Blackness," *Theory & Event* 19, no. 4 (2016), Project MUSE, muse.jhu.edu/article/633278, accessed July 19, 2019.
[111] Surinder Jodhka, "Caste in the Periphery," *Seminar* 508 (2001): 41-46.
[112] Joyce Pettigrew, "The Jats of Punjab," in *Social Stratification*, ed. D. Gupta (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991).
[113] Patel, "Complicating the Tale of 'Two Indians,'" 95.

> the diaspora, it's a lot easier to talk about Blackness because then the people at the top of the race hierarchy are the white supremacists and you don't have to look at the caste privilege that exists not just for your own identity but in your family as well…Many of the prejudices South Asians have towards black people are rooted in the ways they have been taught to think about darker peoples in the subcontinent.[114]

There are two issues addressed in this passage that I wish to expand upon further. First, Soundarajan points out that upper-caste culture has a tendency to stand in as a default for all Indian, or even South Asian culture. For example, the stereotype that religious Hindus are largely vegetarian is exceedingly inaccurate; some Brahmins are, especially Saraswat and Iyengar Brahmins, but even within these groups there is a great deal of variation in dietary restrictions. The majority of Hindu castes eat meat, and several even eat beef.[115]

Second, an association of darker skin with lower caste individuals is a deeply embedded phenomenon in South Asian culture, even in the diaspora. This kind of colorism is not exclusive to South Asian culture; it is well documented in many parts of the world, including in the United States outside of South Asian American culture.[116] However, the caste associations add a further layer of complexity that maps onto South Asian attitudes toward Black people. Darker people are often presumed to be unclean, poor, and unintelligent. Soundarajan and Patel's point is that flaunting caste pride denigrates those in lower castes, as does presuming that all South Asians share the same cultural values. Thus, when *bhangra* artists and consumers claim identification or solidarity with Black people while simultaneously invoking *Jat* pride, it can be read as contradictory and alienating to lower-caste South Asians who have been systematically oppressed for their ancestry and the color of their skin. There is no doubt, then, that these kinds of politics unconsciously played out at Basement Bhangra. When she addressed antiblackness in the space, Malhotra did some of the work of dismantling these dynamics, but I never heard or read about her explicitly discussing how *Jat* pride can unwittingly contribute to antiblack sentiment. In fact, she often played *bhangra* songs at the party that expressed such pride, perhaps exposing a blind spot in Malhotra's own understanding of South Asian antiblackness.

The Evolution of Basement Bhangra

Basement Bhangra began in 1997, when Malhotra only had a few years of professional deejaying experience. She learned the craft through experimentation at community parties, absorbing what the crowd responded to through trial and error. She described her approach to deejaying as a feedback loop. Although she sometimes came in with an idea of a few of tracks she would like to play, she observed the crowd closely to gauge their energy levels in order to figure out what to play. If a track did not receive good feedback from the crowd, Malhotra

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[114] Asam S. Ahmad, "How to Fight a Deadly Caste System," *Colorlines*, April 21, 2015. https://www.colorlines.com/articles/how-fight-deadly-caste-system.
[115] Amrit Dhillon, "In India, Caste System Ensures You Are What You Eat," *Post Magazine*, July 26, 2014. https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/article/1558061/you-are-what-you-eat.
[116] Kimberly Jade Norwood, ed., *Color Matters: Skin Tone Bias and the Myth of a Postracial America* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

responded accordingly by stopping the music, sometimes mid-track, and changing it. Unlike some deejays, she did not play continuous, uninterrupted sets where one song fades almost unnoticeably into the next. Rather, there was often a pause of several seconds between songs while Malhotra decided what to play next. During these pauses, shifts on the dance floor took place as some partygoers would head to the bar to buy another drink and others would return to the dance floor. These pauses felt like a natural place for these shifts to happen. Malhotra sometimes spoke to the crowd mid-song or between tracks, encouraging people to scream, announcing upcoming guest artists, or expressing her gratitude for their showing up. Often, people would yell tracks they wanted to hear when Malhotra was at the mic, but Malhotra rarely responded to these requests, instead attempting to read the crowd visually.

Although predominantly South Asian, audiences at Basement Bhangra hailed from a variety of South Asian countries with different linguistic backgrounds, and from different generations. As I elaborate on later in the chapter, although *bhangra* has roots in Punjabi culture, it grew to symbolize a pan-South Asian culture and identity in the United States and the United Kingdom. There were always many Punjabis present at Basement, but the audience was far from homogenous. Regarding generation: in the year that I attended parties, though the majority of people I met were second-generation South Asian Americans, also present were a significant number of newer immigrants living and working permanently in New York, as well as a few older (60+) first-generation immigrants. I refer to these permanent residents as South Asian American as well in this context.

There were differences in what people wanted to hear at Basement Bhangra that aligned with some of these age and generational differences. Some South Asian American immigrants, particularly Punjabi men who were first-generation immigrants in their 30s and 40s, would tell me they wished Malhotra and her crew would play popular old *bhangra* songs. These attendees would often get annoyed when new material was tested out, muttering aloud that the old stuff is better and more authentic. They would get especially irritated if a popular song from current western pop radio was mixed with a *bhangra* tune. Younger partygoers, second-generation South Asian American men and women in their twenties often appeared to be the most engaged upon hearing these mixes. These different generations seemed to base their preferences on ideas of tradition verses innovation. People who preferred so-called traditional songs were generally the older South Asian Americans; they wanted to hear songs they had known since childhood. They rarely acknowledged the history of innovation and evolution in *bhangra*. This fascinated me because in the diaspora, *bhangra* deejays have always mixed pop and hip hop with *bhangra*. Their preferences, then, seemed to have more to do with resistance to the unknown than the tradition of the genre, which has changed quickly and continuously over time and in different locations around the world. Younger generations at the party were less concerned with nostalgia as a measure of what makes a successful *bhangra* song, instead focusing on whether or not the song had a steady tempo that was easy to dance to.

Although Malhotra listened carefully for audience feedback en masse, she has little patience for critiques about *bhangra* and tradition. In one conversation about the subject, she asked a hypothetical critic, “Traditional what? What’s traditional about [*bhangra*]?” In other words, Malhotra is aware that *bhangra* has not been a stable genre from the beginning. Aside from the presence of the *dhol* holding down the characteristic *bhangra* beat, and the Punjabi

language lyrics, the musical content can be influenced by any number of music genres, including dancehall, reggae, hip hop, and even contemporary western pop music. Thus, although Malhotra is closer in age to many of the anti-innovation Basement Bhangra attendees, her historically grounded understanding of the music means that she vehemently disagrees with those who believe she should only play older *bhangra*.

Malhotra first played New York City's Summerstage in 1995. At the time, the event was poorly attended, but the programming was diverse. She curated a day at the festival in 2005, bringing then-unknown British-Sri Lankan rapper M.I.A. to a US stage for the first time. However, in 2017, when Basement Bhangra ended, Malhotra had not been back to play Summerstage since 2006. According to Malhotra, Summerstage had a lot of South Asian programming from the mid-1990s-early 2000s. With no one left to advocate for more South Asian programming after a change in leadership, however, the number of South Asian-focused concerts dropped off steeply as the concert series grew in popularity.

Most of the time, the party took place at popular nightclubs in Manhattan. From 1997-2009, the party took place at S.O.B.'s., when it moved to Le Poisson Rouge (LPR). In December 2016, Malhotra moved Basement Bhangra back to S.O.B.'s. When I asked her about this decision, she informed me that LPR "just didn't have the vibe" or the volume of party-goers that S.O.B.'s was able to attract. Long-time partygoers told me similar things. One woman, Mona, who had been attending Basement Bhangra since the late 1990s, lit up with excitement upon hearing the news that the party was moving back to S.O.B.'s. "It's just a better venue," she exclaimed. "It was never the same once it moved to LPR."

Neither Malhotra nor Mona would elaborate much on why LPR was never able to attract the same size crowd or create the same vibe, but after attending parties at both venues, I had at least one suspicion as to why Basement struggled at LPR. The basement room at LPR was long and narrow, with a small stage tucked on the short end of one side at a 90-degree angle with the bar. There were also no tables. While there were screens behind the stage and above the bar, the screens were small and difficult to see when the space was crowded. Dancing was difficult in such a tight, narrow space. S.O.B.'s on the other hand, is larger, more spacious, and has a stage centered on one of the longer walls. The bar was on the opposite wall, separated by a raised platform, stairs, and a railing on which to lean while drinking. There was also a separate area with tables and chairs to the right of the stage, and several cocktail tables strategically placed near the bar. At S.O.B's, then, the dancing areas and the drinking areas were compartmentalized, so it was easy to make room for dancing, and for people to sit, stand, and watch if they did not feel like dancing. Particularly talented *bhangra* dancers require a lot of room for jumping up and squatting down, arms and legs spread outwards. In fact, at my second Basement Bhangra party, which was still at LPR, I was accidentally slapped in the face by an inebriated, unwieldy dancer. At S.O.B.'s, it was always easy to spread out and move out of the way.

In other words, the venue itself greatly impacted how attendees felt about the party because different spaces allowed for different possibilities. At LPR, movement had to be restricted, and if you wanted to take a break, it was difficult to find a space to do so without being in someone's way. Additionally, if the night had a theme or featured artist, it was difficult to tell what or who it was because seeing the small screens, where visuals from the night's theme

would be projected, required maneuvering strategically between people to get a quick peek. At S.O.B.'s, several small screens and the large screen behind the stage were visible throughout the venue, and people had a lot more room to dance. The tables also allowed Malhotra to take a more overt approach to politicizing the space. For example, at S.O.B.'s, she would put flyers promoting political actions, such as a rally to protect her neighborhood in Queens from the current anti-immigrant governmental administration (elaborated upon below), on all of the tables and bar surfaces scattered throughout the venue. At LPR, she could only utilize the narrow bar space, making it less likely that all of the attendees would see these flyers. Although I do not believe that changing the venue back to S.O.B.'s is what drove Malhotra to be more overtly political in the last several months of Basement Bhangra, it was certainly a more effective environment in which to do it.

Malhotra released her first and only album in 2007 on Koch Records, a well-known but smaller hip hop label based in New York. Named after the party that made her famous, it includes seventeen tracks created and produced by Malhotra and several veterans in the *bhangra* scene in the UK and the US She also collaborates with hip hop artists like Wyclef Jean, who lends his voice to the opening track, "Basement Bhangra Anthem." Most of the collaborators on the album have also been featured guests at Basement Bhangra at one point, including Panjabi MC, Apache Indian, The Dhol Foundation, Tigerstyle, Hard Kaur, Malkit Singh, and Dave Sharma.

In 1997 when Basement Bhangra began, Malhotra explains, *bhangra* was still seen "as a niche genre where the South Asian American community was just sort of forming in terms of a critical mass of youth." Thus, "Basement Bhangra…in some way became a space that [represented] South Asian-ness" in the United States. At the time, her social circle was largely made up of "queer, activist, academics-in-training."[117] As performer Sikh Knowledge explains, "[Rekha] became like a big queer sister to me. That's important because I'm queer and she made a lane for me. So because of her, I could do what I do and have a space for it."[118] According to Malhotra, although Basement became proportionately "less queer" as the party grew in popularity, it remained a safe place for queer South Asians to exist openly.

Although most South Asian Americans of all religions lean left politically, they are far from politically homogenous or unified. Homophobia is common in the community, particularly among first-generation South Asian Americans. Additionally, the most recent presidential election saw a considerable rise in Republican voting amongst Hindu Americans.[119] It's impossible not to connect this rise in right-wing voting to Trump's anti-Islamic rhetoric, especially considering the rise of Hindu nationalism under Indian Prime Minister Modi's administration and the history of communitarian clashes between Hindus and Muslims in South Asia. While contemporary racial politics has resulted in a rise in inter- and intra-racial coalition-

[117] Rekha Malhotra, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, September 26, 2016.
[118] "Summer Stage: Basement Bhangra/ DJ Rekha," HYFN, filmed 6 August 2017, video, 1:56, posted August 9. 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jrbNdXONuJ0.
[119] Sameer Targe, "Generating a new Republican Indian-American voting bloc," *The Washington Examiner*, May 16, 2017, https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/generating-a-new-republican-indian-american-voting-bloc.

building, fissures and divides remain within, and have possibly even deepened among South Asian American communities.

Additionally, as I have elaborated upon in the first chapter, data from the U.S. Census Bureau reveals that Asian Indians are the highest earners of all racial groups, out-earning White people by a significant margin.[120] As Malhotra and I have discussed at length, many South Asians perpetuate the model minority myth and struggle to understand how racial and economic disadvantages intersect. For example, although South Asian Americans love to consume Black culture like hip hop, many believe their dark skin makes it impossible for them to appropriate it in a problematic way.

Malhotra, who grew up attending predominantly Black public schools on Long Island, tires of explaining to South Asians that Black American experiences are not akin to their own. She explains:

> I was at a meeting in 2000…. I was on the board of an organization on pop and politics … and they were just talking about, "What are the big issues?" And I remember saying, "The biggest problem in this country is that there are too many Black men in prison." And saying that in 2000 didn't make any sense.… I don't think I had the language to say Prison Industrial Complex sixteen years ago, but I knew it because I had experienced it. I mean, not personally, but because I had grown up in a neighborhood that was ravaged by crack-cocaine, and [I] saw my contemporaries go to jail.[121]

As a deejay who both loves and spins hip hop records in addition to or alongside *bhangra*, Malhotra told me she would feel hypocritical if she were silent about systemic injustices that devastate Black communities. Creating events with a platform to address these issues was part of Basement Bhangra's mission from the start. For several years, Malhotra would pair opening acts with different community organizations working to improve the lives of New York's communities of color. Called "Your Attention Please," a large portion of the proceeds from the night would be donated to the organization.

Moreover, there was an even more unmistakable political agenda at Basement Bhangra. Malhotra states, "For me, monthly events like Basement Bhangra and Mutiny were, in themselves, political acts."[122] They were political because she was creating space to exist as a South Asian American in a city and country that is often hostile toward public displays of brownness. The simple act of claiming club nights oriented around brown music and dance means that Malhotra was insisting that South Asian-ness be not only welcomed, but also celebrated outright. Thus, Basement Bhangra's politics were oriented around addressing issues of racial equity and acknowledgment. Even as its *desi* population evolved and became less explicitly politically active, it remained a safe space for politically progressive *desis* to gather,

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[120] United States Census Bureau, "Selected Population Profile in the United States," accessed July 21, 2019, https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=bkmk.
[121] Rekha Malhotra, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, September 26, 2016.
[122] Sudhakhar, "Crafting Community," 170.

sing, and move their bodies to music that made them feel culturally connected to the South Asian subcontinent.

Malhotra also threw Basement parties that highlighted national issues: during the 2004 election, Basement held several "Bhangra Against Bush" events. The poster for this event, designed by Chirag Bhakta, a friend, artist, and frequent collaborator,[123] features a color painting of a woman wearing a sari with her hands held up in position to dance *bhangra* on the left, and a black and white photograph of former president George W. Bush on the right, with the words "Basement Bhangra Against George W. Bush" appearing in the center in bold red and black letters. The design of the poster closely resembles vintage boxing match advertisements, except that instead of sponsors, it features the names of guest artists above and below the central images.

Figure 2.2 "Bhangra Against Bush" poster for Basement Bhangra, 2004. Created by artist Chirag Bhakta, also known as Pardon My Hindi.

Like all of the themed nights at Basement Bhangra, "Bhangra Against Bush" was less about organizing attendees to campaign against George W. Bush outside of the party space. Instead, it was about making it clear to attendees that Malhotra holds particular leftist progressive beliefs, and stepping into her party space meant, to some degree, that you did, too.

After Hurricane Katrina, proceeds from the party went to organizations dedicated to rebuilding New Orleans. Malhotra also deejayed additional benefits to support Katrina victims,

[123] Bhakta designed the Basement Bhangra logo and also collaborates frequently with Vijay Iyer, the subject of Chapter 4.

including a benefit for a New York-based branch of the Asian Pacific Islander Americans organization (APIA) to help rebuild the predominantly Vietnamese neighborhood of New Orleans known as Versailles. Malhotra supported a host of other organizations at Basement Bhangra, also volunteering her deejaying services for benefits outside of the party, including Sakhi, South Asians Against Police Brutality, political campaigns for progressive South Asian American politicians, and many others. As Vivek Bald explains, many of these organizations were inspired by organizing that was happening in London at the time to fight against racist acts.[124] It is difficult to say what effect holding these events in the space of Basement Bhangra had on the crowd; people I spoke with who had attended the party since its early years never brought up leftist politics as being an impetus for attending. Instead, they cited the sense of South Asian American community and belonging and their love for *bhangra* music and dance as the primary reasons for attending regularly. These were things they had difficulty cultivating regularly in their lives outside of the party.

Malhotra continued to draw attention to social justice issues nevertheless, because she felt that it was important to force South Asian Americans to confront problems and contradictions within their own communities. Moreover, Basement Bhangra created a space to bring attention to oppression directed toward South Asian American communities, sometimes by other South Asians. When we spoke in 2017, Malhotra elaborated on how her motives shifted throughout the years. After 9/11, she saw firsthand how her communities were further fractured. Some Hindus and Sikhs became more outspoken about their non-Muslim status, while others formed coalitions with each other to fight growing anti-brown sentiment. Even people in the latter category, however, sometimes inadvertently reinforced religious divisions. Malhotra, for example, admitted her discomfort with International Turban Day, an annual festival that began in April 2004 to bring awareness to Sikh turban-wearing practices. She states, "Yeah, you're calling it Turban Day, but you're really just saying Sikh Turban Day…People all over the fucking world wear turbans."[125] Although Malhotra does believe that Sikh awareness is important, she recognizes how unintentionally divisive projects like Turban Day can be because of the implied exclusivity. At Basement Bhangra, she aimed to foster a sense of community and inclusion. This was one of the main reasons she insisted on having a *bhangra* dance lesson at the beginning of every party, a unique feature among New York *bhangra* parties. Malhotra wanted to make sure that even if you weren't Punjabi, Sikh, or familiar with *bhangra*, this was a safe space for you to learn. This meant that *bhangra* novices, like me, still felt welcome at Basement Bhangra because, like others, I felt little pressure to appear skilled.

Outside of Basement Bhangra, Malhotra was deeply involved in the South Asian Women's Creative Collective (SAWCC) from its beginnings in 1997 and for many years following. The SAWCC is a nonprofit dedicated to providing both physical and virtual space for South Asian women artists to collaborate, co-create, and shape their artistic work across a wide variety of disciplines (www.sawcc.org). Her involvement in the SAWCC shaped her ideas about how community building could function through the creation of organizations based not only on cultural heritage, but also on "shared politics, histories, and artistic leanings."[126]

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[124] Sudhakhar, "Crafting Community," 173.
[125] Rekha Malhotra, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, April 19, 2017.
[126] Sudhakhar "Crafting Community," 175.

Malhotra admits that creating community among South Asian Americans is a difficult task. Tension and power struggles emerge when peoples' differing accesses to privilege are at odds with each other. It becomes even more complex when issues of racial and class privilege intersect in the United States. As Malhotra has told me on numerous occasions, she fears that South Asian Americans do not fully understand their positions of privilege, focusing on issues concerning South Asian Americans specifically, rather than working to understand how structural racism impacts people of color writ large. She also finds it frustrating when South Asians obsess over notions of tradition, noting that when White Americans appropriate South Asian cultural symbols, the community is up in arms, but when South Asian American deejays appropriate hip hop without any knowledge or acknowledgement of the music's history, many South Asian Americans fail to see it as problematic.

As Basement Bhangra grew and aged, the crowd became less politically active overall, and eventually, Malhotra began putting in less effort into creating a space that was oriented toward her politics. Simply continuing to throw the party was a satisfactory enough political act. The crowd also shrank as the years passed, and Malhotra admits that maintaining volume at Basement Bhangra became difficult as her peers aged. By the time Basement ended, she was well into in her mid-forties, and so was the original crowd. Younger South Asian Americans were harder and harder to get into the Basement Bhangra space, as newer scenes with younger deejays developed around New York City. At least part of the problem also has to do with the fact that first- and second-generation South Asian Americans in their twenties often came to the United States under very different historical circumstances than those who had immigrated in large numbers after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. According to 2012 U.S. Census data, South Asian immigration rates to the United States began dropping in the early 2000s because the demand for US visas from South Asian countries largely outweighs the number of visas available. Stricter quotas have resulted in expanding waiting lists, especially for people from countries like India and Pakistan, significantly slowing down the visa approval and path to citizenship processes.[127] This has had an impact on younger generations of South Asian Americans because this more difficult approval process has resulted in more scattered, less concentrated populations of South Asian Americans. Many more recent South Asian immigrants arrive on student visas and find themselves returning to South Asia upon finishing their studies, unable to find sponsored employment that would allow them to remain in the US. Perhaps, then, younger South Asian Americans are not forming cohesive communities in the same way they did in the last thirty years of the twentieth century. Also possible is that they are forming different kinds of communities in New York City, and Basement Bhangra simply did not align with their values and interests. Either way, getting a younger crowd into Basement Bhangra proved challenging for Malhotra.

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[127] "Annual Report of Immigrant Visa Applicants in the Family-sponsored and Employment-based Preferences Registered at the National Visa Center as of November 1, 2012," Travel.State.Gov, U.S. Department of State, accessed July 21, 2019, https://web.archive.org/web/20130217034041/http://www.travel.state.gov/pdf/WaitingListItem.pdf.

The constant organizational and promotional work was taking a toll on Malhotra both mentally and physically. Although she was well-established in the South Asian American community as one of the most important South Asian deejays, she still had to put up with artists who took advantage of her time by showing up late to meetings, denigrating her skills as a female deejay, and expecting her to do all of the promotional work herself. Moreover, many partygoers from the early years had largely stopped attending due to familial and professional responsibilities. She struggled to balance the needs of her older friends who needed to return home before it was too late, with those of her guest artists who complained that they were scheduled to perform too early. Understandably, Malhotra began feeling burned out by the efforts required to promote and throw a monthly party. Toward the end of 2016, she officially decided to end Basement Bhangra the next year, twenty years after it first began.

Basement Bhangra's Final Year

Over the course of my fieldwork from August 2016-August 2017, I attended ten Basement Bhangra parties. The first four were at Le Poisson Rouge, the venue since 2009, and five were at S.O.B.s, the venue in which the party had originated, and where it returned in December 2016. The final party was at Summerstage in Central Park. The parties at the clubs varied in size, the smallest night having only fifty or sixty people at its height, with the largest having over two hundred people. The first hour and a half generally featured either a member of Malhotra's deejay crew (DJ Petra or DJ Shilpa), or local South Asian American artists. A couple of times a year, Malhotra let Subcontinental Drift, a collective of South Asian performing artists, hold their monthly open mic nights during this time. As described in the prologue, despite these early performances, the majority of the crowd did not show up until at least 9:00 p.m., with the crowd reaching maximum volume around 11:00 p.m. Although small by the end, the party lasted until 2:00 a.m. Often, the final few partiers would be invited to go out with the deejay afterward for food.

Malhotra always had a live video artist mixing visuals throughout the night. These visuals usually included clips from popular *bhangra* music videos interspersed with advertisements and artwork for Basement Bhangra. If the night had a theme, photographs based on the theme would also be mixed in. As Anjali Gera Roy writes

> Bhangra needs to be conceptualized as an integrated performance that employs various permutations and combinations of sounds, words, movement in varied contexts and produces varied effects on different spectators and performers, which are invariably mediated by circuits of capital and technology.[128]

Roy's point is that *bhangra* is not meant to be consumed passively. Rather, *bhangra* is conceived of as part of a process of continued mediation through the production of audio and visual culture, and through bodily movement. All of these elements were an integral part of Basement Bhangra. Live performance, then, was also important element of the party. Usually, there would be a live guest singer and *dhol* (drum) player featured at some point in the night, and most often, the *dhol* player featured was a woman. This was clearly a strategic choice on Malhotra's part, as *dhol*

[128] Roy, *Bhangra Moves*, 27.

players are nearly always men. This would bolster the strength of the recorded drums that played simultaneously, generating further excitement in the crowd and increasing the intensity of their dancing. Live singers, who were frequently featured during short sets, achieved similar results, usually with a combination of recorded tracks, sometimes with a live *dhol*.

From the beginning, Malhotra has collaborated with other deejays at Basement Bhangra, but the majority of these artists have been men. It was not until the final couple of years of Basement that Malhotra finally formed a deejay crew that she felt respected and understood her value as a musician. Consisting of two other women deejays named DJ Petra and DJ Shilpa, Malhotra was comfortable with them in no small part due to their shared gender. Although the number of women deejays has grown significantly over the last decade, sexism toward them has always been an issue. Malhotra has frequently (though not universally) experienced disrespect by men colleagues, such as arriving to meetings late with no notice, making sexist remarks about her ability to deejay effectively, and asking her about irrelevant details, such as inquiring about her sexuality during professional meetings.[129] During my conversations with DJ Shilpa and Madame Gandhi, two of Malhotra's frequent women collaborators, they recalled experiencing similar issues while working with South Asian men in the music industry.

Having heard and read about Basement Bhangra's history of political organizing, I was surprised to learn that there was no political agenda being championed when I attended my first party in January of 2016. People came, danced, drank, and left. The next several parties I went to were similarly devoid of an obvious or blatant political agenda. I wondered if I was missing something, since this drastically contradicted the party's reputation. In our first formal interview in October of 2016, I directly asked Malhotra about it. She explained that for the last few years, she was feeling disillusioned with organizing and direct action. She largely blamed the twenty-four-hour news cycle and social media for these feelings, describing herself as "completely overwhelmed" by the continuous expectation to be well-informed.[130]

It seemed that the Basement Bhangra I would attend for the duration of my fieldwork would be little more than a space to party and celebrate South Asian-ness. Certainly, this was a kind of politics in and of itself, but it had shifted away from what I had expected, which was a more overt display of leftist political activism. Attendees both old and new were warm and welcoming, making it easier for me to overcome my insecurities as both a non-Punjabi Indian and a terrible dancer. Although the majority of partygoers were South Asian, a significant number of people were always present from other racial and ethnic groups. Most either currently lived or had lived in New York at some point, and the crowd ranged in age from twenty-one to folks well into middle age, and sometimes older.

The majority of Basement Bhangra regulars I talked with were in lucrative professions such as doctors, financial advisors, physical therapists, and graphic designers. They mostly lived in Manhattan and Brooklyn, although a few lived in Queens or nearby suburbs in New Jersey or Long Island. Covers for the party ranged from $0-15. Malhotra wanted access to the party to be affordable for everyone, so if you arrived early (usually prior to 8:00 p.m.), you could enter the

[129] Rekha Malhotra, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, April 19, 2017.
[130] Rekha Malhotra, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, September 26, 2016.

venue for free. After 8:00 p.m., tickets were $10-15 at the door, or $5 if purchased in advance through Malhotra's listserv. Drinks at the venues were costly, as would be expected in downtown Manhattan. Partygoers could easily spend $35+ on two drinks in a night. People drank liberally, so most of the crowd seemed comfortable enough financially to spend anywhere from $20-$100 in one night.

Malhotra told me that although the club atmosphere did not preclude sexual dynamics at Basement Bhangra, the party was different from other *bhangra* parties in New York because people came primarily to dance. I experienced this stark contrast when I attended a couple of other *bhangra* parties in New York during my fieldwork period. Malhotra played sets at both of these parties, but she was not the organizer. One party, which took place at an enormous upscale club in downtown Manhattan, stood out particularly. The club consisted of different rooms on three different levels, each of which featured a different deejay and was packed with primarily South Asian Americans dressed in their finest club gear. Most women wore tight, cleavage-baring dresses, and men wore suits with no tie.

The dress code at Basement was always relatively casual for New York. Although some people did show up in their business attire after work, others wore casual jeans and T-shirts. The open dress code at Basement was probably influenced by Malhotra's own casual style, which rarely strays from jeans and a casual top or T-shirt. At this one-off *bhangra* night in Manhattan, some of the rooms featured *bhangra* music, including the largest room, and others played other South Asian-influenced electronic dance music. There was less variation in age at this club compared to Basement. I felt old as a woman in her mid-thirties. Even more odd to me than the dress code or average age was that no one was dancing. Most people stood around the bar drinking with friends or flirting, while others chatted around the VIP booths. On the upstairs dance floor, people occasionally swayed subtly to the beat of the music, but most were standing around, drinking and chatting or flirting awkwardly. The downstairs room with EDM did have more people dancing, although not *bhangra*. When I arrived, Malhotra hadn't yet taken the stage. When she finally did in the main room, a small group of Sikh men in the VIP section began dancing *bhangra*, and they pulled me and a few other women into their section to dance with them. They started by attempting to teach us new moves, but immediately after the first dance ended, they began hitting on us, asking us for our phone numbers. Having never experienced this at Basement Bhangra, I was immediately uncomfortable and extricated myself from the group.

There was something remarkably different about the crowd at this party, and in fact, upon relaying this experience to friends at Basement, I learned that many regular Basement attendees avoid these one-off club nights for this very reason. Malhotra has managed to cultivate and maintain a club environment that is oriented around partying without the pressure to perform sexuality. It would be disingenuous to say that sexual dynamics do not exist at Basement, but for me and others I spoke with, it felt easy to avoid. This speaks to the work Malhotra put into cultivating a particular environment, one in which heteronormative patriarchal gender dynamics were less likely to play out than in other nightclub environments. Somehow, she was able to maintain this progressive standard without explicitly stating it at any of the parties that I attended.

Gender-wise, Basement Bhangra was relatively diverse, and unlike other club parties I've attended, an equal number of men and women would dance, mostly in small groups. The most skilled dancers would display their talent in dance circles that would form, dissolve, and reform on the dance floor. The atmosphere felt celebratory and carefree.

Then, Donald Trump was elected president.

On December 1, 2016, the first Basement Bhangra after the election and the first party held at S.O.B's in seven years, flyers were scattered on every raised surface of the venue encouraging people to attend a next-day rally to declare Jackson Heights a "Hate Free Zone."

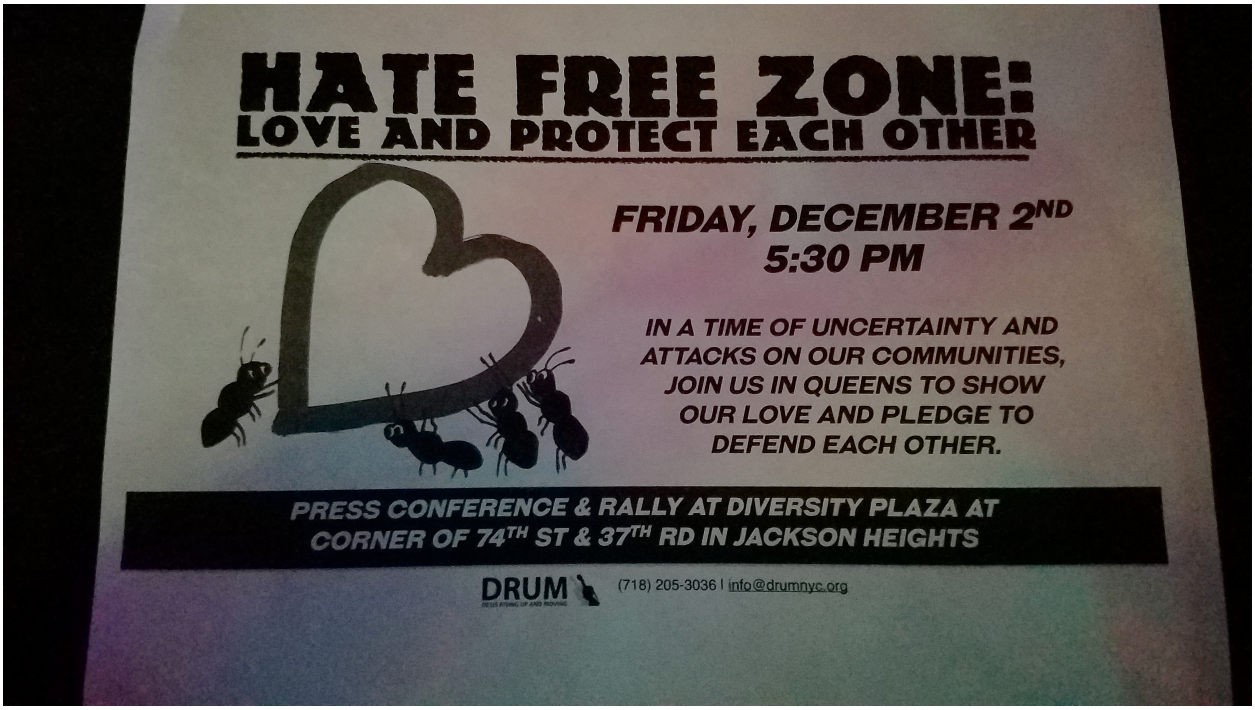

Figure 2.3 "Hate Free Zone" flyer.

Jackson Heights, located in Queens, is home to the largest concentration of South Asian businesses and residents in New York City, but also has significant populations of other people of color, especially recent immigrants. The rally was being organized by DRUM (or Desis Rising Up and Moving). Founded in 2000, DRUM "is a multigenerational membership led organization of low-wage South Asian immigrant workers and youth in New York City" (www.drumnyc.org). Malhotra, who has lived in Jackson Heights for many years, had been involved with numerous DRUM events in the past. With the imminent threat of Trump's anti-immigrantion policies hanging over her head, Malhotra sprang into action, requesting fellow partiers to fight to protect her neighborhood.

The next party, in early January, was titled, "Bye Bye Barack."

Figure 2.4 "Bye Bye Barack" Basement Bhangra visuals, January 2017.

Malhotra's resident video artist named Chica, projected images from Barack Obama's eight-year-long presidency, including an image of Malhotra posing with the president in the Oval Office. "Goodbye Barry" was written in white text above the photograph. The photo was from 2010, when Malhotra was invited to the White House to perform for Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. All of the projected images were of Obama smiling and interacting with citizens, clearly meant to evoke a sense of nostalgia and the loss of a personable and well-grounded Black president. Trump's election had clearly incited Malhotra into making space for politics in Basement Bhangra once again, which she later confirmed to me in private.

At the April 2017 party, Malhotra officially announced that after twenty years of monthly parties, she would end Basement Bhangra in the coming months. She also revealed that the final party would take place at Central Park as part of New York City's summer concert series, Summerstage.

She had hinted that the end of the party was near in our first interview many months before, so although I was not entirely surprised by the announcement, most attendees were. In

private, I asked Malhotra why she was ending it. She explained, "I think it's run its course…as an artistic project for me." She also revealed that she was moving to Cambridge, Massachusetts in the fall to attend graduate school at MIT in Comparative Media. I asked if she planned to throw parties in Boston. "I'm so over it," she stated adamantly. "I will take gigs because I'm going to be a poor grad student…but no once a month anything. I'm *done*. Done, done."

Upon hearing this, it occurred to me that perhaps part of the reason Malhotra had lost her passion for making Basement Bhangra a politically active space was that she had lost her passion for the party itself. Her renewed energy starting in late 2016 seemed to be an extension of the growing political organizing post-Trump's election, including the Women's March, No Ban No Wall airport protests, and the more recent DACA and gun control protests. His shocking win, along with Malhotra's decision to permanently end the party, relit the spark she needed to recreate the atmosphere of progressive politics that defined its past. Basement Bhangra ended with two final parties in 2017. The first, on Thursday, August 3, took place at S.O.B.s. Three days later, Basement Bhangra ended with a massive party in Central Park at NYC's Summerstage.

The final party at Summerstage took place on a typically swampy summer afternoon in Central Park's Rumsey Playfield. It was a joyful event, attended by people who'd been going since the party's inception as well as people who'd never been before. Also in attendance were Malhotra's closest family and friends, and several artists who would perform before the deejay's final set. Malhotra did not dress up for this special event, but she was still conspicuously dressed, as emblazoned across her blue T-shirt was the logo, "Black Lives Matter."

Figure 2.5 Malhotra at Summerstage wearing her "Black Lives Matter" T-shirt. Photo credit: HYFN.[131]

[131] "20 Years of Basement Bhangra/Summer Stage," HYFN, last updated August 9, 2017, http://www.h-y-f-n.com/blog/20-years-of-basement-bhangra-summer-stage.

In-between acts, the large screen on stage cycled through progressive political hashtags, as well as a couple of newly created hashtags for the event. "#NoBanNoWall," "#SayHerName," "#BlackLivesMatter," "#ResistWithRhythm," and "#BasementBhangraLove."

Figure 2.6 The final Basement Bhangra party at Summerstage, August 6, 2017.

Unlike the club nights where the maximum number of guests was typically no more than a couple hundred people, Summerstage had a few thousand attendees. Like previous parties, most were South Asian. Along with her regular collaborators, DJ Petra, DJ Shilpa, and *dhol* player Malinder Tooray, DJ Rekha invited several artists from the South Asian diaspora to perform, including Canadian rapper Horsepowar, Los Angeles-based percussionist and rapper Madame Gandhi, British Indian musicians Panjabi MC and Apache Indian, and local New York rapper and singer Sikh Knowledge. With the notable exception of the legendary Panjabi MC, most of the artists were not *bhangra* artists. A local *bhangra* troupe was also present to give a dance lesson between sets, also performing several choreographed dances. British filmmaker, Gurinder Chandha (who wrote and directed *Bend it Like Beckham*) made a brief guest appearance, along with comedian Aparna Nancherla and rapper Heems. The event lasted four hours in total, packed with back-to-back performances.

Throughout the afternoon, neither Malhotra nor the other artists made references to the political hashtags or her "Black Lives Matter' T-shirt. Thus, while her politics was present and literally centered in the middle of the stage on the screen, it did not feel central to the event. At the same time, it would be foolish to dismiss these politics as tangential. Although the event was South Asian-centric in nearly every other way, Malhotra carefully and consciously chose to wear a "Black Lives Matter' T-shirt for the final Basement Bhangra. She also incorporated visuals that clearly indicated her solidarity with BLM and the No Ban No Wall movements. Based on my research and conversations with her, I suspect that even more than demonstrating her interest in

interracial coalition building, Malhotra incorporated these elements to force the largely South Asian American audience to grapple with their meaning. Their presence could challenge the audience to ask themselves, "Why, at the most pivotal event of her life, did Malhotra wear a "Black Lives Matter" T-shirt? Why is she projecting these texts?" And in doing so, Malhotra hoped that the audience's attention would not only be redirected toward her politics, but would also be given the opportunity to process what it means to be a South Asian in solidarity with other people of color. While the otherwise jubilant celebration may seem to contradict this reading, it aligns well with Basement Bhangra's twenty-year history. Basement Bhangra was never about mere entertainment. It began as a politicized space, and in its own way, it ended as one.

In this chapter, I have shown how Rekha Malhotra's upbringing influences her personal politics, leading her to approach her *bhangra* deejaying practice as a way of uniting South Asian Americans to support progressive political issues. *Bhangra* also plays a central role in the next chapter, but the background that drives the subject, Sunny Jain, toward solidarity building is markedly different. While Malhotra's drive derived from witnessing significant racial inequities during her childhood, Jain's interest in interracial solidarity building is profoundly influenced by his religious upbringing in Jainism. Despite these differences, they share an ability to create joyous atmospheres through their musical practices.

Chapter 3: *Gaadi of Truth*: Sunny Jain and the Concept of *Anekāntavāda*

Introduction

Red Baraat, led by *dhol* drummer Sunny Jain, enters the stage at SFJazz's Miner Auditorium and begins with an unmetered jazz-like improvisation. Seven people follow him onto the stage, including two other South Asians and founding Red Baraat members: Sonny Singh on trumpet and vocals, and Rohin Khemani on percussion. Other band members that night include Jonathan Goldberger on guitar, Chris Eddleton on drumset, John Altieri on sousaphone, Jonathan Haffner on soprano and alto saxophones, and Ernest Stuart on trombone.[132] After a few minutes, Jain hits the *dhol* emphatically to signal the end of the improvisation, and Red Baraat launches into their first song. From then on, we are led on a high-energy, fast-paced journey. Jain encourages even those seated in the tiered seating to come down to the dance floor, and soon the floor is densely packed.

It's March 18, 2016, and although I am somewhat familiar with Jain's work, it's my first time hearing Red Baraat. Although Red Baraat is frequently labeled a *bhangra* brass band by the media, I immediately notice that they are drawing upon myriad styles of music from South Asia, the United States, Latin America, and more. Maliha, a Pakistani American friend that I attend the concert with, recognizes a couple of traditional Punjabi folk and *bhangra* songs that she grew up listening to, but the horn harmonies and rhythmic punctuations are more reminiscent of jazz and Indian brass band traditions.

The band also plays several Red Baraat originals. A little over halfway through the set, they play "Shruggy Ji," the title track from their third album, released in 2013. Jain, Singh, and Haffner shout the syncopated lyrics, "Shrug your shoulders/And twist your hands/Move your body/And shake your shins/Just feel the rhythm/Under your skin/Drip drop the sweat/Shruggy Ji, let's begin." People in the audience catch on to the instructional words, raising their hands to perform the characteristic *bhangra* shoulder shrug. It is difficult, though, because we are packed so close together, so the attempts at *bhangra* dancing fade relatively quickly. In the middle of the song, everyone aside from the rhythm section drops out and the band quiets down, though the tempo remains steady. Jain approaches the microphone and invites three volunteers onto the stage to engage in a dance battle, chosen primarily based upon their enthusiasm to join the band on the stage.

[132] Although these were the performers that particular night, the band has a somewhat rotating lineup, with Singh and Khemani being among the only other consistent Red Baraat members aside from Jain. Also noteworthy is that Red Baraat is only made up of men. Gender is a dimension of diversity that deserves greater attention, but is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Figure 3.1 Sunny Jain asking for dance competition participants at the BRIC in April 2017.

Each contestant demonstrates their skills for several seconds in the middle of the stage as the band accompanies them, mostly using *bhangra* moves as a starting point, then improvising other styles of dance, like hip hop, salsa, or simple hip-swaying movements. After each person has their chance, Jain leads the crowd in voting for the winner of the dance contest, which is determined informally through audience screams. There is no prize aside from pride for winning the contest, but the crowd and the contestants are equally enthralled. It proves to be an effective way for the band to connect with the audience. In the coming year, I learn that the Red Baraat dance contest is a regular occurrence, repeated at every one of their shows I attended throughout 2016 and 2017. At this first show, however, it feels novel and exciting.

After the contest, Red Baraat finishes their set with a few more tunes before retiring for the night. Maliha and I are dripping wet with sweat, having jumped up and down all evening. It has been a very long time since I have attended such an energetic show, and I feel invigorated and inspired.

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The bandleader of Red Baraat, Sunny Jain, is a Punjabi American man who, as his name implies, was raised in the Jain faith. Jains make up only about .4% of the population in India, and only a small percentage of them hail from the Punjab region, according to 2011 Indian Census data.[133] Thus, his Punjabi Jain identity is relatively unusual. Sunny Jain began his music career as a jazz drum set player, but since the 2008 formation of Red Baraat, he has made a name for himself on the *dhol*, a double-headed drum primarily used in *bhangra* and other Punjabi-

[133] "Census and You: Religion," Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, accessed July 21, 2019**,** http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_And_You/religion.aspx.

influenced musics. Although he still plays drum set in other projects, such as his trio with Hindustani vocalist Samita Sinha and guitarist Grey Mcmurray, known as Tongues in Trees, Red Baraat occupies the majority of his time these days. They tour and record extensively, especially throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe.

In the introduction to *Resounding Afro Asia: Interracial Music and the Politics of Collaboration*, Tamara Roberts writes about Red Baraat as one of several representatives of a contemporary wave of intercultural and interracial music groups that "showcased a vision of U.S. Americanness that…could not be reduced to a singular label."[134] In particular, Roberts refers to the diverse racial backgrounds of the musicians in Red Baraat, most of whom are non-White, and the diverse musical influences that inform their sound. Jain takes a great deal of pride in the band's diversity, although he insists that it was not racial and ethnic diversity that he was searching for when he first formed Red Baraat. Instead, he was looking for musicians with different musical backgrounds than his own, and whose playing he admired. His goal was to form a band that could play South Asian-influenced melodies arranged in new ways, and to play shows that bring people joy in spite of their differences. Thus, in the beginning, he did not think much about the racial and ethnic diversity within the band. The more people wrote about it, however, the more he realized that "it *is* a big deal. We can utilize this to empower ourselves and understand that this is normal and this is how the world works."[135] In other words, he began to realize that he could use their diversity as a strategic tool to force music critics and their audience to think about a more diverse notion of Americanness.

This idea of multifacetedness and diversity is key to understanding Sunny Jain's identity and politics. In this chapter, I explore how his religious upbringing in Jainism influences how he navigates his life as a socially progressive musician. In particular, I focus on the concept of *anekāntavāda*, a religious idea from Jainism that is often translated as "many-sidedness," "non-one-sidedness," or "pluralism," to show how and why Jain's musical work reveals a particular way of seeing the world. All of these various translations are inexact, but I use pluralism most frequently for *anekāntavāda* because it is the term he uses as a synonym. Jain discusses this concept frequently in interviews and promotional materials about the band and his work.

Although *anekāntavāda* has repeatedly been pointed to by outsiders to make a claim that adherents to Jainism are more open to considering other perspectives than adherents to other religions, Jain scholars insist that in reality, *anekāntavāda* implies a very specific ethical view – in order to live an ethical life, one must recognize that diversity of all living beings is vital to survival and harmony.[136] It is this belief in the sacredness of all living beings, the right for all beings to survive and be heard, that drives Sunny Jain's political and musical work. In this chapter, I argue that Jain's seemingly utopic views on music and politics are actually indicative of a thoughtful and calculated engagement with *anekāntavāda*, a philosophy that demands that followers give consideration to different ways of understanding the world. Although his religious

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[134] Tamara Roberts, *Resounding Afro Asia: Interracial Music and the Politics of Collaboration*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 2.
[135] Sunny Jain, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, September 2, 2016.
[136] Peter Flügel, "Jainism," in *Encyclopedia of Global Studies*, Vol. 3, ed. Helmut K. Anheier and Mark Juergensmeyer (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishing, 2012), 975-79.

background informs his participation, the broader artistic networks that he operates within share similar desires to value and negotiate differences in order to create a more racially equitable and just world through the dissemination of joy.

Background

Early Life

Sunny Jain was born in 1975 in Rochester, New York. Despite growing up and learning jazz in the same town, Jain and Vijay Iyer, the subject of Chapter 4, did not know of each other until the late 1990s after they had both moved to New York. I suspect that this is largely because South Asians in the diaspora have a tendency to form social circles based on their linguistic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Iyer's family is Hindu, South Indian, and Tamil-speaking, while Jain's family is Jain, North Indian, and Punjabi-speaking. Jain's parents had emigrated from North India in 1970, though they were both born in what is now Sialkot, Pakistan. After Partition, his parents' families both fled independently to India. His mother's family settled in Delhi, while his father's side went to Rajasthan. Although his parents were raised among a large number of Punjabi Jains, the majority of Jains are not Punjabi.[137]

Jain's two siblings – a sister, older by nine years, and a brother, older by three – influenced his musical taste. Jain particularly looked up to his brother, a talented guitarist who listened to everything from Tchaikovsky to Van Halen. His brother also had a habit of picking up instruments and playing them well with little experience, making Jain both envious and fascinated. After school, he would rush home and sneak into his brother's room to listen to his record collection, largely choosing what to listen to based upon the record covers. It was through this that Jain was first exposed to Western music, including Genesis, and one of his favorite bands to this day, Rush. It was because of Rush drummer, Neil Pert, that Jain first thought to himself, "Rhythm, man, I love rhythm."[138]

Jain's parents primarily listened to religious music and Bollywood music. *Bhajans*[139] were constantly played in the house during their Jain religious prayers, while his mother cleaned the house, and at parties they attended with other Jain families. His father was the founder of the Jain Society of Rochester and the Indian Society of Rochester, and Jain recalls attending parties throughout his childhood with fellow South Asians where they would watch Bollywood films from the 1970s and 80s. During the summer, they would visit extended family in India, where they were exposed to Hindustani music, *bhangra*, and current Bollywood songs.

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[137] Sunny Jain, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, September 2, 2016. According to Indian Census data from 2011, the majority of Jains are Maharashtran (Marathi-speaking), in central India. For more on this, see "C-1 Population by Religious Community," Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, accessed July 21, 2019**,** https://web.archive.org/web/20150913045700/http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/C-01.html.

[138] Sunny Jain, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, September 2, 2016.

[139] *Bhajans* are religious songs in Hinduism and Jainism.

Jain began taking music lessons through his school in fourth grade, starting with the violin. He did not care for it greatly, so when the opportunity arose to switch to drums the next year, he jumped at the chance. He soon became serious about it, studying with drummer Rich Thompson.[140] For the first year and a half, he practiced at home on a drum pad. He elaborates:

> And I loved it. I was content with that. I didn't even ask for a drum set. I didn't really ask for anything else. I was like, "This is awesome." I just practiced … until maybe a year later, then I asked my dad, "Hey, can I get a snare drum?" He made me wait for another six months, then eventually we went to House of Guitars, the HOG in Rochester, and bought a snare drum for sixty bucks.

Jain continued practicing on his snare drum for another year before his parents finally decided to buy him a drum set. He had decided to take private lessons with Thompson by this point, and he was particularly interested in learning to play like Neil Pert and other progressive ("prog") rock drummers he admired. Instead, Thompson encouraged S. Jain to learn jazz basics:

> And I only took to it because it was rhythmically complex. He started giving me some jazz music, and it was interesting, but it was always the rhythm that drew me to it.… I don't think I understand the language of jazz until I was fifteen or sixteen, so it was a couple years later … when I started understanding if there were forms, and people were soloing over chord changes, and trading fours and eights. [At first], I was just listening to it and soaking up all the vocabulary Rich [Thompson] was giving me.

Some of the music Thompson gave Jain to listen to, he hated at first. Jain describes hearing Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* for the first time at age sixteen and thinking, "This is boring." Yet, throughout this time, he continued to practice and hone his skills as a drummer, motivated primarily by a desire to improve and learn how to play complex rhythms. By the time he finished high school, Jain began to connect to jazz on a more emotional level.

By this point, Jain had decided to attend music school for college. His intention was to study at Oberlin Conservatory or New York University, but the schools were too expensive. His father, who previously held a science research position at the University of Rochester, had just accepted a job at Rutgers University. At first, Jain was hesitant to apply to Rutgers, but he soon learned that the university had a highly-regarded jazz program. His parents were largely supportive of his desire to study music, but they also wanted him to be practical and economical in making this decision. When he learned he would get tuition remission because of his father's position at Rutgers, he decided to attend.

Although Jain had been studying drums seriously for the better part of a decade, he did not have a strong background in music theory when he began college at Rutgers. He struggled in his ear training and music theory classes, failing his first semester of jazz theory. Jain practiced

[140] Thompson has been a Professor of Music at Eastman School of Music in Rochester for the last twenty-five years, and has also toured and recorded extensively with a number of well-known jazz artists throughout the country.

for hours at the piano to improve his ear training skills, also transcribing pieces to try to understand what was happening theoretically.

It was during these first two years of college that Jain also began composing for the first time. The year before starting university, he attended a summer jazz camp at Eastman School of Music, where someone introduced him to the music of Trilok Gurtu. Gurtu, probably best known for his work with British jazz and fusion guitarist John McLaughlin, is an innovative Indian drummer recognized for his diverse collaborations and his innovative percussion set-ups. Jain immediately grew enamored with Gurtu's music, explaining that Gurtu was "the first *desi* person that I recognized as doing what I was doing … That didn't really strike me until I heard him."[141] Suddenly, upon hearing Gurtu's music, the lack of Indian musicians in jazz was brought to the forefront of Jain's mind, and he started to wonder more about how his own heritage might fit into his musical journey. Jain revealed to his composition teacher in college that he did not connect personally enough to most of music he was trying to mimic as he learned composition, and his teacher finally told him to start transcribing the music he did connect with. By figuring out what was happening on a technical level in music made by other Indian musicians, his instructor contended, he might start to develop a deeper understanding of the kind of music he wanted to write. Gurtu's music was among the first music Jain began transcribing.

Jain also began paying closer attention to the racial and ethnic makeup of musicians in the jazz program at Rutgers, where there were no other South Asians. He told me that he began feeling out of place and conflicted when he realized that the majority of his South Asian colleagues were in departments such as engineering. The feeling of being an anomaly in jazz is one that other Indian American jazz musicians, like Vijay Iyer and Rudresh Mahanthappa, have told me they felt when they first began their professional careers. Moreover, like Jain, they began to experiment with exploring their Indian heritage more explicitly during college, which is a common time for South Asian American immigrants to begin to grapple with their ethnic identities substantially for the first time.[142] These simultaneous conflicting feelings of being interested in his cultural background for the first time, yet also feeling isolated and disconnected from his Indian community, resulted in Jain's first composition, called "Washy Wish." He told me, "It was this 'washy wish' that I had to always feel a part of my culture, but at the same time … maybe it was a bit of 'ah, screw you [other South Asians].' I'm just going to do my thing." Incorporating his feelings about his cultural and religious background into his jazz compositions and arrangements felt like a natural and genuine way to develop his artistic voice. The day after he composed "Washy Wish," Jain decided he wanted to explore his identity more explicitly in his music, and he arranged a popular *bhajan* he had learned as a child. This was the beginning of an ongoing practice, as Jain has since arranged a *bhajan* on nearly every album he has released.

Jazz Ambassadorship and Early Career Development

After college, Jain moved to New York City to study music business at New York University (NYU) and to pursue life as a professional musician. He has remained in New York

[141] Sunny Jain, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, September 2, 2016.
[142] Sunaina Maira, *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth: Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 83-148.

ever since. In 2002, he applied to be a Jazz Ambassador for the United States Department of State along with his trio at the time, which included organist Kyle Koehler and guitarist Chris Bergson. They were chosen along with a few other groups that year, and together they toured seven countries in West Africa, including Ghana, Benin, Togo, Nigeria, Senegal, Gambia, and Guinea.[143] The Jazz Ambassadors program has a long history that began during the Cold War with Dizzy Gillespie traveling throughout the Balkans and the Middle East to represent the US in 1956.[144] It may seem ironic that the government chose a Black man to represent the country at a time when segregation was still law in much of the US, and when the Civil Rights Movement was just gaining momentum. But, as history scholar Penny Von Eschen has written, the Department of State viewed jazz as an appropriate vehicle to represent the international state during this period, because they could "simultaneously insist on the universal race-transcending quality of jazz while depending on the blackness of musicians to legitimize America's global agendas" in order "to project an image of American nationhood that was more inclusive than the reality."[145] In other words, the US could preempt criticism of its segregationist policies by choosing Black musicians to represent American culture abroad.[146]

At the same time, Von Eschen points out that civil rights advocate and Harlem congressman Adam Clayton Powell played a significant role in arranging Gillespie's involvement in the ambassadorship. Powell used his power strategically to push a progressive political agenda in the wake of mid-twentieth century historical circumstances.[147] More specifically, several nations in Asia and Africa had recently gained independence from colonial European powers, and in an attempt to create alliances with these new predominantly non-White nations, President Eisenhower and the Department of State were more willing to send African Americans to represent Americanness.[148] Moreover, Von Eschen in part credits these programs for contributing to the proliferation of jazz around the world, especially in countries outside of Western Europe.[149] The United States has continued to sponsor arts programs abroad since this time, though the exact format has changed many times. One constant, however, has been that these programs are a general attempt to both foster better relationships with other countries and

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[143] Debra C. Argen, "Luxury Experience," www.chrisbergson.com, posted February 1, 2006, http://www.chrisbergson.com/press/press_pages/press_frame_42.html.
[144] Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
[145] Ibid., 4.
[146] Other important works on jazz diplomacy include Harvey G. Cohen, "Visions of Freedom: Duke Ellington in the Soviet Union," *Popular Music* 30, no. 3 (2011): 297-313; Lisa Davenport, "Jazz and the Cold War: Black Culture as an Instrument of American Foreign Policy," in *Crossing Boundaries: Comparative History of Black People in Diaspora*, ed. Darlene Hine and Jacqueline McLeod (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 282-315; and Lisa Davenport, *Jazz Diplomacy: Promoting America in the Cold War Era* (Oxford, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2010).
[147] Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World*, 6-7.
[148] Ibid., 7.
[149] Ibid., 249.

to connect American artists and art with people in the places they travel, presenting a carefully crafted idealized image of Americanness.[150]

Through the second half of the twentieth century, the US grew more and more racially diverse, particularly after the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act expansions on immigration that allowed more immigrants from non-European countries (see Chapter 1 for more details), and the country as a whole began to identify more as a multicultural nation.[151] By the time Sunny Jain and his collaborators participated in the program, the US government accepted the nation's diversity as a strength, at least superficially. This made it possible for someone like Jain to act as a representative of Americanness in a way that would not have been possible forty-five years earlier when Gillespie first served as an ambassador since, at that time, people of color who were not African American were still so absent from US popular culture and cultural institutions.

The arts ambassadors program that Jain participated in was a short-lived revival of the mid-twentieth century Jazz Ambassadors program in which Gillespie had participated, lasting only a few years between 1998 and the early 2000s. When Jain traveled to West Africa with his trio, it had been less than a year since 9/11, and the US was embroiled in large political debates about going to war with Iraq. At the time, President George W. Bush claimed that Iraq was responsible for the attacks, and he was working hard to convince Americans to believe that war was the solution to ensure US safety. During the trip to West Africa, Jain, Koehler, and Bergson would play private shows for foreign dignitaries and ambassadors, as well as free public shows for broader communities. Later, Jain vividly recalled the sight of US guards armed with AK-47s protecting their venue in the first country they visited, Guinea – which appalled him. He was told it was for the trio's protection, as authorities were concerned there might be an uprising of some sort. It was at this point that he and his collaborators began to feel discomfort with their positioning as representatives of the US. Jain explained how his somewhat naïve understanding of the program changed quickly:

> We finished [the show] out, and I remember we went back that night and we were talking about it. I'm like, 'Man, this is strange.' I think it finally hit us [that] the vibe of this whole thing is to present diplomacy through the guise of a music program. It's very much meant for political relations, and the assuaging of circumstances. It just reminded me, 'wow, this is just another imperialistic kind of mode through music, and we're just little pawns in it.'[152]

In public, the trio was required to answer questions about U.S. politics in a highly calculated and diplomatic manner, and Jain told me that he became skilled in avoiding questions that might warrant a controversial answer. Still, he admitted to me that he felt uneasy about it, revealing that when he read about Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie serving as jazz ambassadors in the past, he had idealized notions of these programs' aims. In reality, this realization and uneasiness

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[150] Danielle Fosler-Lussier, "Music Pushed, Music Pulled: Cultural Diplomacy, Globalization, and Imperialism," *Diplomatic History* 36, no. 1 (2012): 53-64.
[151] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 1986), 148.
[152] Sunny Jain, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, September 2, 2016.

was common among musicians who participated in arts diplomacy programs even fifty years before, as Penny Von Eschen has written in her book on Cold War Era jazz diplomacy.[153]

Despite this discomfort, Jain and the trio had many positive experiences, too. During their six weeks of travel, they met and played with local musicians, learning some language and music from them. They were also able to arrange enough time away from the government liaisons who accompanied them to have one-on-one or small group conversations with locals about US politics, during which they more openly expressed their anti-war stances.

The same year as the Jazz Ambassador trip, Jain released his first studio album as the Sunny Jain Collective, called *As Is*. The album features saxophonist Steve Welsh, bassist Gary Wang, and guitarist Rez Abbasi (with whom Vijay Iyer also collaborates). He has since released three more albums under this name, including *Mango Festival* (2004), *Avaaz* (2006), and *Taboo* (2010). All four albums feature Jain's compositions, as well as jazz arrangements of popular Hindi songs and Jain *bhajans*.

His original compositions also frequently deal with issues around his Indian identity. For example, the first track on his 2006 album *Avaaz*, called "Sialkot," references the city his parents' families originally came from. In the liner notes for the album, he explains that his parents had to flee Sialkot in 1947 during the Partition because of extreme violence. Sialkot was part of Punjab, one of the states split during the Partition, and his family felt unsafe there after it became part of Pakistan. The song uses the first two lines of a poem by a Partition-era Pakistani poet, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, called "Dawn of Freedom."[154] The lyrics are sung by vocalist Samita Sinha, transliterated and translated below as they appear in the liner notes from the album.

Transliteration

Ye daagh-daagh ujaalaa, ye shab-gaziida sahar,
Vo intizaar tha jis kaa, ye vo sahar to nahin

Translation

This stain-covered daybreak, this night-bitten dawn,
This is not the dawn we expected[155]

In a 2016 interview with Scroll.in, an independent news website based in India, Jain was asked about the song and his choice in lyrics:

> My family was from Sialkot. Faiz's poem speaks to what my family went through. My father told me about trains[156] and the killings. My father was 7 and saw his cousin killed

[153] Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World*.
[154] "Liner Notes to *Avaaz*," Sunny Jain Collective, *Avaaz*, Sinj Records SR0406, 2006, compact disc.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Mass violence occurred between India and Pakistan in the wake of the Partition, especially in the Punjab region, bisected by the border between the two newly formed countries. Refugees attempting to escape from one country to the other, including those traveling by train, were

> next to him. He was almost left behind by his mother because he wanted to stay with friends. Though he rarely talked about this, it had a big influence on me. And of course Partition was a huge influence on millions of people. This song is not a political statement. It's an emotional one.[157]

In the song, Jain grapples with the effects of inherited trauma, reflected in these lines from Faiz's poem. Although he claims it is not a political statement, he recognizes that his emotional statement is one that likely resonates with millions of others who have also inherited trauma from the political decisions made in the wake of decolonization, as well as ethnic and religious tensions that go back for hundreds of years on the Indian subcontinent. Grappling with his identities through music is a journey he began during his college years; a journey he has continued since.

Although Sunny Jain Collective albums received good critical reviews in a few jazz publications, and although he played extensively throughout New York with numerous groups through 2010, it was not until his next project, Red Baraat, that Jain began to gain wider recognition in the music business. This was also the project that drove him to emerge from behind the drum set to take center stage with the *dhol*.

The Dhol and Red Baraat Beginnings

Jain began studying Indian percussion during his second year at Rutgers. He took his first lessons, on the North Indian classical drums called the tabla, from a mostly retired tabla player named Paramjyoti Kocherlakota. The lessons were relatively informal, and he continued with them until he moved to New York City after graduating from Rutgers. After the move, he attempted to continue studying the tabla with a couple of other teachers, but he soon realized that he could not dedicate the amount of time he would need to become an expert tabla player while also focusing on his jazz drumming skills and graduate school. He stopped studying these drums formally, but on a trip to New Delhi in 2000 or 2001, he went to a music store to buy a set of tabla and ended up purchasing a *dholki*[158] and a *dhol* as well. He had never played either of these instruments, but he recalled hearing the instruments being played in Punjabi folk music as a child.

Similar to Vijay Iyer, discussed in the following chapter, Jain has a contentious relationship with journalists, critics, and music executives who pigeonhole him as a musician: presuming that he only plays Indian-influenced music. For example, NY Jazz Report journalists Thad Kawecki and Will Wolf wrote in a 2004 review of a Sunny Jain Collective show that "Jain's Indian roots are always apparent, and are especially noticeable in his highly sophisticated

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subject to this violence, resulting in at least 180,000 deaths. For more details, see Swarna Aiyar, "'August Anarchy': The Partition Massacres in Punjab, 1947," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 18, no. 1 (1995): 13-36.

[157] Nate Rabe, "Interview: Sunny Jain, the Bhangra King of Desi Jazz," *Scroll.in*, pub. May 29, 2016, https://scroll.in/article/808949/interview-sunny-jain-the-bhangra-king-of-desi-jazz.

[158] Another type of double-headed barrel drum, smaller in size than the *dhol* and played with hands rather than sticks.

and complex sense of time."[159] As a drummer, most of Jain's training has been in jazz, not Indian musics, and he frequently draws exclusively upon his jazz vocabulary when playing his drum set. Like Indian music, jazz is also known for using "sophisticated and complex" rhythms. Often, it seems as though music industry executives and media are eager to read Indianness into everything he does, despite his training.

At the same time, when he does use Indian rhythmic or melodic concepts in his music, he feels like it is an honest reflection of himself as an Indian American. When music media do recognize the multiple influences at play, they often have a tendency to simplify the careful and complex thought processes, training, and identity journeys that contributed to the creation of the music. For example, in a 2006 review of the Sunny Jain Collective album *Avaaz*, journalist Budd Kopman wrote that Jain and his collaborators were "part of a growing group of musicians whose roots are from South Asia ... and are *naturally* cross-fertilizing with other practitioners" (emphasis mine).[160] The fact that Kopman characterizes Jain's music as natural, as though he became well-versed in jazz and Indian music fusion through osmosis, rather than through a conscious engagement and years of training within these music traditions, reflects an attitude that irritates musicians like Jain. It is not uncommon for music critics to oversimplify musicians' processes, but the word "natural" in particular suggests that Kopman is engaged in a kind of racialized stereotyping: *because* Jain is Indian American, he is bound to "cross-fertilize." It diminishes all of the work he has done to progress his art.

Moreover, Jain is also aware of his shortcomings as a musician participating in Indian music traditions: admitting, for example, that he would never play tabla in public because he does not have nearly enough training or practice to be competent at an acceptable professional level.[161] Mastering the tabla, as Jain is acutely aware, takes years of practicing several hours a day. He spent those hours instead mastering the drum set. To satisfy his desire to perform with an Indian drum, he was drawn to the *dhol* in part because, as an instrument primarily utilized in less rhythmically complex folk and popular musics, he could become competent on it more easily.

Some time between 2000 and 2003, Jain began taking *dhol* lessons with Dave Sharma, who he had met through a mutual friend and for whom he subbed on drum set frequently in a Broadway Bollywood show called *Bombay Dreams*. Jain's training as both a jazz drummer and tabla player made learning the *dhol* easier. He explained to me:

> I just heard the music growing up, and it's a pretty amazing instrument in how it just hangs on you…. A lot of the stuff I had learned on tabla was pretty transferable, at least the understanding of syllables[162] and how it can loosely relate to the *dhol*…. The

[159] Thad Kawecki and Will Wolf, "Sunny Jain Collective: Knitting Factory," *NY Jazz Report*, posted December 22, 2004, http://www.nyjazzreport.com/Jain.htm.
[160] Budd Kopman, "Sunny Jain Collective: *Avaaz*," *All About Jazz*, posted June 5, 2006, https://www.allaboutjazz.com/avaaz-sunny-jain-sinj-records-review-by-budd-kopman.php.
[161] Sunny Jain, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, May 5, 2017.
[162] Known as *bol* in Indian classical music.

> language of North Indian rhythm applies to *dhol*, so it was mostly [about] getting the technique down: learning how to hold the sticks, and how to develop those muscles.[163]

Although this statement could be read as Jain believing in some form of musical training by osmosis, he was actually referring to a process of enculturation (listening to Punjabi music) as well as rigorous training (studying the tabla).

Jain particularly appreciated the *dhol* because of the mobility it gave him. Instead of sitting behind his drums at the back of the stage, he could move around freely on the front half of the stage: because the *dhol* is an instrument that hangs around the player's neck and is played standing up. This also enabled him to place himself front and center, where he could have more control over ensembles; connecting more directly with his collaborators and his audience because he could be physically closer and better able to sustain direct eye contact. In other words, playing the *dhol* opens up possibilities for Jain that affect not only what he plays rhythmically, but also the politics that might develop between him and his bandmates, as well as between him and the audience. This closer, face-to-face contact is an essential component of Red Baraat shows, creating a feedback loop between the drummer and the audience that generates immense energy and joy in their live performances.

After buying his *dhol* in India in the early 2000s, Jain began practicing the instrument more regularly while continuing to develop jazz projects on his drum set. By 2008, he felt confident enough in his skills as a *dhol* player to put together a band to serve as the music for a friend's *baraat*, the groom's wedding processional in Sikh, Hindu, and Jain weddings in North India. During the *baraat*, the groom's family and friends lead the groom to meet the bride, dancing and celebrating. In North Indian families, this procession is traditionally accompanied by a *dhol* and often several brass instruments as well. The first wedding was a success, and Jain soon began arranging songs for more friends' weddings. The bands were so well received that two years later, he decided to formally start a presentational-style *baraat* band. He called the band Red Baraat, as a nod to both his favorite color and the occasion for which a band like this would traditionally perform. Soon, Jain added less traditional elements to the brass and drum lineup, such as a guitar, a drum set, and various Latin jazz percussion instruments (played by another percussionist). The addition of these instruments helped translate their sound to the concert stage, also allowing Jain to arrange and compose music that incorporated a more diverse array of sounds influenced by jazz, rock, Caribbean, and Latin musics.

Red Baraat released their first album, *Chaal Baby*, in 2010. They were immediately embraced by world music critics, appearing on several "Best of" lists that year.[164] Their second album, 2012's *Shruggy Ji*, debuted at number one on the Billboard World Music Charts. Within two years, Sunny Jain established himself as the leader of one of the most sought-after brass bands in North America and Europe.

Red Baraat

[163] Sunny Jain, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, September 2, 2016.
[164] "Red Baraat," *Jain Sounds*, accessed July 19, 2019, https://www.jainsounds.com/red-baraat.

As of 2019, Red Baraat has released five studio albums as well as one live album. They tour regularly throughout North America, Europe, and more recently in the Middle East. Their sound is decidedly eclectic, incorporating influences from jazz, hip hop, Latin musics, Bollywood, Hindustani, and Jain religious music. Sunny Jain is the bandleader, and like the songs on his straight jazz albums from 2002-2010, many of Red Baraat's songs are Jain's originals or arrangements of popular *bhangra* songs or Jain *bhajans*. A few songs have also been composed by other band members: most notably founding member Sonny Singh, who plays trumpet and sometimes contributes vocals.[165]

Red Baraat's sound is frequently compared to New Orleans brass bands. Given Jain's jazz education, the band's frequent jazz-influenced improvisations, and the use of the sousaphone to deliver bass lines, this is hardly surprising. However, these comparisons often bother Jain, who enjoys informing journalists that India has had a processional brass band tradition of its own for hundreds of years. Ethnomusicologist Gregory D. Booth has written extensively on this topic; most notably on the use of brass bands during an Indian *baraat*. During a wedding, he writes, brass bands are "typically hired by the groom's parents to accompany the wedding procession…. The festive procession begins at the house of the groom's family … and the whole group proceeds, dancing along the way, to the bride's home."[166] The brass band tradition, however, did not begin with wedding processionals, as Booth points out. Rather, he suggests that some brass and reed instruments arrived with military ensembles during the Mughal Empire around the sixteenth century, and that Indians adapted them to already existing processional traditions.[167] Musicologists Trevor Herbert and Margaret Sarkissian hypothesize that European brass instruments replaced other reed and brass instruments in Indian brass bands during British occupation in the Victorian Era as "a marker of modernisation, an index of affluence, and an appropriation of the prestige derived from the former association of such bands with aristocrats."[168] They also note that although some of the instruments in Indian brass bands are European in origin, the way that Indians use them remains "distinctly Indian."[169] Thus, it is important to Jain to recognize the Indian tradition that Red Baraat draws upon, even though their music is mixed with other musical traditions from around the world, including jazz.

At the same time, Indian brass bands and New Orleans brass band traditions do have some important cultural and political commonalities and differences. Both developed because of colonial encounters. In India, Mughal and British conquerors brought with them the instruments and particular styles of militarism that helped develop into the unique Indian brass band style. In the United States, New Orleans jazz developed as a result of European enslavement of Africans in the Caribbean and the South. European military band instruments, African syncopated rhythms, and a multitude of harmonic and melodic influences from Europe, Africa, and the

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[165] Singh is a Sikh American activist, writer, and musician, who resides in Brooklyn.
[166] Gregory D. Booth, "Brass Bands: Tradition, Change, and the Mass Media in Indian Wedding Music," *Ethnomusicology* 34 no. 2 (1990): 246.
[167] Ibid., 252.
[168] Trevor Herbert and Margaret Sarkissian, "Victorian Bands and Their Dissemination in the Colonies," *Popular Music* 16, no. 2 (1997): 175.
[169] Ibid.

Caribbean developed into what became New Orleans brass band music.[170] Moreover, brass bands in both traditions have served as processional musics; in India, for weddings and military processionals, and in New Orleans, for weddings, funerals, and other celebrations or holidays. However, as scholar Helen A. Regis has written, although it has been appropriated for other uses and by people outside of African American communities, historically, the primary function of the New Orleans brass band tradition is to "provide a space or the expression of individual and communal grief, while joining local histories with contemporary experiences of Blackness."[171] In other words, the New Orleans brass band tradition is, in part, a music-based political expression of oppressive experiences faced by the African American community. In contrast, as is argued by Herbert and Sarkissian above, the contemporary Indian brass band tradition is largely thought to have evolved out of a desire to obtain a higher status under British occupation.[172] Both New Orleans brass bands and Indian brass bands, then, have always had an internal politics, but that of the former as an expression of grief and resilience, as well as celebration and joy in the face of ongoing persecution, and that of the latter as a means to obtain more political power under a very different kind of subjugation.

Red Baraat also has a political agenda, although it is quite different from both the Indian and New Orleans brass traditions' agendas. Red Baraat, I argue, is primarily concerned with presenting a notion of Americanness that is driven by Jain's understanding of pluralism: a group of musicians who are primarily men of color, and who are creating cohesive music in spite of their differences. There is no doubt that this Americanness is one primarily influenced by Sunny Jain's cultural heritage. Red Baraat's Indianness is literally front and center with the presence of Jain and his *dhol*, as well as their songs, which often feature melodies from Hindi and Punjabi songs and use many Indian rhythms. At the same time, even though the band's personnel has changed throughout the years, they have always been racially and ethnically diverse. All three South Asians hail from different religious and cultural backgrounds; current and previous members include several Black, East Asian, and Latino members.[173] Jain's brass arrangements often use close jazz harmonies mixed with complex, rapid Indian melodies. There are three percussionists in the band playing instruments from vastly different musical traditions, including a drum set, a Latin Caribbean percussion setup (bongos, timbales, congas, claves, etc.), and the *dhol*. Other influences, such as hip hop, cumbia, ska, and rock appear in their repertoire as well.

Red Baraat Latin percussionist, Rohin Khemani, told me that playing in Red Baraat is what first exposed him to the immense diversity of South Asian music and culture.[174]

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[170] Numerous scholars have documented this history, including: W. Royal Stokes, *The Jazz Scene: An Informal History from New Orleans to 1990* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Mick Burns, *Keeping the Beat on the Street: The New Orleans Brass Band Renaissance* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); William J. Shafer and Richard B. Allen, *Brass Bands and New Orleans Jazz* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1977); and many more.

[171] Helen A. Regis, "Blackness and the Politics of Memory in the New Orleans Second Line," *American Ethnologist* 28, no. 4 (2001): 770.

[172] Herbert and Sarkissian, "Victorian Bands," 175.

[173] Roberts, *Resounding Afro Asia*, 1.

[174] Rohin Khemani, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, May 11, 2017.

Furthermore, he admitted that "the idea of identity in Red Baraat has helped me appreciate how complex [the concept of] identity is." Khemani's parents immigrated to Canada from India in the late 1960s and for the most part raised him to assimilate into (White) Canadian culture. After Khemani joined Red Baraat, his fellow South Asian band members and audience members began to ask him about his ethnic background in more detail. Upon realizing that he knew very little about his father's North Indian *Sindhi*[175] background and his mother's South Indian *Malayalam*[176] heritage, he began asking his parents questions for the first time. This helped him understand that even if he had grown up exposed to more of his Indian heritage, he likely still would not have been familiar with the Punjabi-influenced music of Red Baraat given his parents' non-Punjabi roots. Gaining a better understanding of his cultural background, then, helped Khemani feel less insecure about his inexperience with Indian music in Red Baraat.

Drawing upon numerous musical traditions in a brass band is certainly not unique,[177] but I propose that Jain's way of doing so, and his reasons, are deliberate and strategic, and deeply connected to his religious background. To get to the heart of this, however, it is first important to understand some fundamental concepts in Jainism.

Anekāntavāda and Sunny Jain

The origins of Jainism are not documented, but this non-theistic religion is known to have been well-established on the Indian subcontinent by the second century BCE.[178] Although influenced by Buddhism and Hinduism, Jainism is an independent religion with up to five million followers throughout the world, the majority of whom reside in North India. The main tenets of Jainism are the beliefs in nonviolence (*ahimsā*), non-attachment (*aparigraha*), and pluralism (*anekāntavāda*).

It is this last concept in particular, *anekāntavāda*, that Sunny Jain references frequently as grounding his dedication to social justice advocacy through his music. In literature on Jainism, *anekāntavāda* has been translated as non-onesidedness, many-sidedness, or pluralism. All of these words imply some kind of relativism, or the idea that there are multiple ways to understand the world. As Peter Flügel points out, however, it is important not to conflate the idea of pluralism with the idea that any way of looking at the world could be equally valid. He writes, "Jain modernism is significant, because it projects itself globally as an alternative form of modernity…It claims that the universal implementation of Jain values in the world was always

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[175] A linguistic group from contemporary Pakistan, although most Sikh and Hindu *Sindhis* moved to India after Partition. For more, see Mehtab Ali Shah, *The Foreign Policy of Pakistan: Ethnic Impacts on Diplomacy, 1971-94* (London: IB Tauris, 1997).
[176] A linguistic group primarily from the South Indian state of Kerala.
[177] See for example, Andrew Snyder, "Critical Brass: The Alternative Brass Movement and Street Carnival Revival of Olympic Rio de Janeiro" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2018); George McKay, "'A Soundtrack to the Insurrection': Street Music, Marching Bands and Popular Protest," *parallax* 13, no. 1 (2007): 20-31; and Alexander Marković, "'So That We Look More Gypsy': Strategic Performances and Ambivalent Discourses of Romani Brass for the World Music Scene," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 24, no. 2 (2015): 260-285.
[178] Flügel, "Jainism," 975-979.

part of the sociopolitical agenda of the tradition."[179] In other words, Jains believe that their way of looking at the world is the way everyone should look at the world.

Rhetoric scholar Scott Stroud has studied this idea in more detail in Jain religious texts. He argues that the kind of pluralism in Jainism is called *engaged pluralism*, which is "the orientation that seeks to accommodate and engage the views of others in one's own system of thought but in such a way as to privilege one's system of thought as a source of insight or value."[180] Both Flügel and Stroud are pointing out that the idea of *anekāntavāda* is to ask people to consider multiple perspectives *as a value* in and of itself. Even more, in Jainism, the concept provides a backdrop about how to communicate when there are multiple points of view. As Stroud writes:

> The Jaina rhetoric of *anekāntavāda* can be reconstructed as a two-part whole: (1) a metaphysics of perspectivism and nonbivalent properties of the world (*nayavāda*) and (2) a concrete rhetorical scheme showing us appropriate argumentative moves in cases of disagreement (syādvāda). This rhetorical orientation leads one to communicate in ways that resist one-sided, nonmultiperspectival views. It aims for an interesting and engaged sort of inclusivism.[181]

In other words, in Jainism, people are encouraged to engage in open debate. The aim may or may not be to come to some sort of agreement, but all parties should agree that there are multiple ways of understanding the world and interactions within it.

The concept of *anekāntavāda* is even more complex when we consider the Jain concept of *ahimsā*, or nonviolence. For Jains, nonviolence is a concept that goes beyond human-to-human interactions, instead involving *all* living beings. Many Jains will not eat anything that contributes to the death of a living being; in addition to animals, this often includes root vegetables like potatoes, carrots, and garlic, because killing the root structure of the plant results in the death of the entire plant. Thus, *anekāntavāda* is also about considering the perspectives of nonhuman living beings, even if they are unable to communicate intelligibly.

By now, it should be clear that reducing *anekāntavāda* to a simplistic utopic concept of "can't we all just get along?" would be inaccurate. Indeed, it is actually a concept that requires an agreement that all living perspectives be considered and valued, whether or not you agree with them.

Sunny Jain has discussed pluralism in relation to his music-making, especially with Red Baraat, on numerous occasions. In one interview, he told me:

> Humanity has to come first in everything. Beyond humanity, it's all living things… Not just humans. It has to come before borders, it has to come before nations, it has to come

[179] Flügel, "Jainism," 977.
[180] Scott R. Stroud, "*Anekāntavāda* and Engaged Rhetorical Pluralism: Explicating Jaina Views on Perspectivism, Violence, and Rhetoric," *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* 17 (2014): 133.
[181] Ibid., 143.

> before a religious divide…. I'm not saying homogenize everything. I'm absolutely not saying that … but when these small identities take lead above something else like humanity or living beings, then problems arise.[182]

While he was reflecting on these ideas, he did not mention Jainism. I followed up by asking him about his religious upbringing, and he admitted that it has deeply influenced how he thinks about his personal and professional politics. Being a lifelong vegetarian (and more recently, mostly vegan), practicing environmentalism by reducing waste, and openly discussing the different values that he and his band members have in Red Baraat seems to have all emerged from Jain concepts that were instilled in him as a child.

Jain mentions pluralism as a core value frequently in interviews, and on his personal website, he states that one of his missions is "to spread his pluralistic message through cerebral as well as visceral means."[183] By visceral means, he is referring to *feeling* the idea of pluralism through the vibrations of the sounds of his music by juxtaposing different cultural sounds.

Jain's dedication to the concept of *anekāntavāda* made me curious about his role as a bandleader. I particularly wondered if Red Baraat puts the idea of pluralism into practice within the band by functioning as a collective. All three members of the band who I interviewed, however, including Jain himself, informed me that Jain is the clear leader of the band. Although they discuss the songs they will perform and the venues in which they may play, Jain makes all of the final decisions related to Red Baraat. This may seem somewhat contradictory given that *anekāntavāda* is about the acceptance and debate of multiple viewpoints, but according to Jain, a large band like Red Baraat simply could not function without a clear leader.[184] He prefers to hire musicians for Red Baraat who are willing to support his vision. At the same time, he understands the importance of collaborating with people who can challenge his vision, stating that these challenges sometimes "heighten the vision. It could morph into something that is greater than the original vision."[185] He finds this easier to do in smaller collaborations like his trio, Tongues in Trees. Thus, applying *anekāntavāda* to practical situations can seem challenging, but we should also recall that although the concept is about the consideration of others' views, acceptance of those views is not necessary.[186] Moreover, major Jain texts on *anekāntavāda* do not discuss leadership explicitly, so how to deal with hierarchical differences within groups is unclear.

Still, Jain does find it important to look for bandmates who, in addition to being diverse and skilled musicians, are individuals with whom he can converse and from whom he can learn, on a personal level. This is directly connected to his understanding of pluralism.[187] Chemistry in

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[182] Sunny Jain, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, September 2, 2016.
[183] Sunny Jain, "Sunny Jain," accessed July 19, 2019, https://www.sunnyjain.com/.
[184] Although I believe it is more difficult to do so, there are some bands that function without clear leaders. For example, Benjamin Brinner has written about Bustan Abraham, a 7-person band that did not have a bandleader for over a decade. For more, see Benjamin Brinner, *Playing Across a Divide: Palestinian Musical Encounters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[185] Sunny Jain, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, May 5, 2017.
[186] Stroud, "*Anekāntavāda*," 134-56.
[187] Sunny Jain, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, May 5, 2017.

verbal conversation, for Jain, translates to the performance stage, yielding effective musical conversations, and this is what makes Red Baraat such a cohesive band, despite each of the musicians having different musical backgrounds.[188] When discussing their 2015 album, *Gaadi of Truth*, S. Jain explained to the Huffington Post:

> We meet different communities and people, learning about one another [on the road], which all leads back to an understanding of pluralism and a multiplicity of viewpoints, versus a certain ideology of politics or religion that's often thrust upon us by media…The lesson of *Gaadi of Truth* is about this journey, and inside that is a party pack of tubes and brass and drums.[189]

Put another way, Red Baraat is the *gaadi* ("vehicle" in Hindi) that delivers the message of pluralism to the audience, encouraging them to recognize and celebrate their differences together. The message is particularly potent in their live shows, where Jain encourages the audience to interact with each other and the band by dancing, following movement instructions, and screaming and jumping for joy. In fact, after watching them live, I find Red Baraat audio recordings slightly flat in comparison to their live shows because their live performance energy is so infectious. It is music that is much better experienced in the presence of a large group of people. Jain is well aware of this, and it is largely what drives him to tour with the band continuously.

Red Baraat and the Politics of Spreading Joy

Occupy Wall Street

In order to spread this message of pluralism, Red Baraat has been involved in a number political advocacy campaigns. In 2011, they played music at the early stages of the Occupy Wall Street protests.[190] The Occupy movement began in September of 2011 in Zuccotti Park in Manhattan, located in the heart of New York's financial district. The protests at the park soon spread throughout the country, eventually spreading to other parts of the world. The Occupy movement broadly aims to draw attention to how the richest one percent of people in the world controls the vast majority of the global economy, resulting in ninety-nine percent of people being unwittingly controlled by a few ultra-rich and powerful individuals. Brass bands have a long history of performing during protest movements all over the world, including in Brazil, Ireland,

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[188] Sachyn Mital, "Red Baraat's Message of Pluralism: An Interview with Sunny Jain," *Pop Matters*, pub. March 27, 2013, https://www.popmatters.com/169725-red-baraat-an-interview-with-sunny-jain-2495768646.html; Eamon Whalen, "indians and cowboys and everyone else," *Context*, posted January 2, 2017, https://contexts.org/articles/indians-and-cowboys-and-everyone-else/; Pawan Dhingra, "The Hendrix of Dhol," *Saada*, posted March 19, 2015, https://www.saada.org/tides/article/the-hendrix-of-dhol.

[189] Ashley Jude Collie, "Red Baraat's Infectious Bhangra Funk, Pluralistic Message and its Gaadi of Truth Playing Nationwide," *Huffington Post*, published December 6, 2017. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/red-baraats-infectious-dh_b_6727984.

[190] Julie dermansky, "Red Baraat Playing in Zuccotti Park," video, 05:09, October 17, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_iuAB0huJUs&feature=fvst.

and the United States.[191] Scholars like George McKay and Andrew Snyder[192] have looked at how the presence of brass bands during protest alters spaces, mobilizing and energizing people.

A five-minute YouTube video of Red Baraat playing at the protest in October 2011, exactly one month into the occupation, shows Sunny Jain leading members of the band, including two trumpet players (one of whom is current member Sonny Singh), a soprano saxophonist, and a snare drummer, around Zuccotti Park.[193] Jain screams exuberantly every few seconds, sometimes Hindi or Punjabi phrases meant to energize the audience, and sometimes wordless shouts. Although the band marches for the first few minutes of the video, they are not leading a processional, but rather walking the perimeter of the protest. Occupiers watch them, some sitting on blankets and tarps, some standing with posters in their hands. Many people cheer and take photographs or record videos as Red Baraat passes, but most people watch silently. Nearly four minutes into the video, Jain stops and turns toward his band members, and they form a circle, playing to each other. A news crew seems to be filming them, and some loose concentric circles begin to form around the band and the news crew. Jain and the snare drummer begin to play denser, louder rhythms, and the crowd responds enthusiastically, screaming and dancing. A few people throw their fists into the air. The video ends with Jain beginning to scream what sounds like the beginning of a chant, but the YouTube clip ends abruptly and I have been unable to determine what he shouts. It is clear, however, that forming this circle drew a much more directly engaged crowd than marching the perimeter of the park.

I did not directly ask Jain about Red Baraat's participation in Occupy, but original member Sonny Singh was part of Occupy Wall Street (OWS) from its beginnings. In addition to being a musician, Singh is an effective organizer and activist around many social justice issues in New York. He and Rupa Marya, the subject of Chapter 5, are good friends and use similar activist strategies, participating in closely aligned activist networks. During early meetings of the OWS General Assembly, Singh, along with a group of activists of color, immediately noticed how the language on developing OWS documents seemed to imply that racism was a thing of the past. As Singh told *The Nation* journalist Habiba Alcindor, he quickly realized that only White people had drafted the document without realizing that they had omitted perspectives of color.[194]

Early reporting on protestors tended to focus on demographic factors such as age, rather than race, noting that most protestors were between 18 and 29.[195] By late October, however, numerous news outlets, such as The Washington Post,[196] The Nation,[197] and The American

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[191] McKay, "A Soundtrack to the Insurrection," 20-31.
[192] Snyder, "Critical Brass."
[193] dermansky, "Red Baraat Playing in Zuccotti Park."
[194] Habiba Alcindor, "How People of Color Occupy Wall Street," *The Nation*, pub. November 4, 2011, https://www.thenation.com/article/how-people-color-occupy-wall-street/.
[195] Brian Stelter, "A News Story is Growing with 'Occupy' Protests," *The New York Times*, pub. October 12, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/13/us/occupy-wall-street-protests-a-growing-news-story.html.
[196] Stacey Patton, "Why Blacks Aren't Embracing Occupy Wall Street," *The Washington Post*, pub. November 25, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-blacks-arent-embracing-occupy-wall-street/2011/11/16/gIQAwc3FwN_story.html?noredirect=o

Prospect[198] began reporting about the lack of involvement of people of color in OWS. In November 2011, Washington Post journalist Stacey Patton asked, "Why should [Black people] ally with whites who are just now experiencing the hardships that blacks have known for generations?"[199] In the same article, Patton notes that while African Americans make up over 12% of the US population, less than 2% of OWS protestors were Black. Although I was unable to find statistics about the percentages of non-White and nonblack protestors, the OWS was largely reported as made up of primarily young, White people.

Sonny Singh and his friends believed that the OWS was an important opportunity even for communities of color. In that spirit, they convinced OWS leadership to change wording in their demands to better reflect the realities of work around race that still needs to be done, and also formed the OWS People of Color working group. Although perhaps in a smaller, less concentrated way, bringing Red Baraat to OWS served a similar function, helping bring attention to voices of color within the movement by being a loud, indisputable, albeit temporary, presence.

Voices of Our Vote

In 2016, Red Baraat contributed a song from their 2013 album, *Shruggy Ji*, to a 32-track album curated by a number of Asian American political advocacy groups for an album they entitled *Voices of Our Vote: #MyAAPIVote*. *Voices of Our Vote* was inspired by the knowledge that Asian American voter turnout is statistically low compared to other racial and ethnic groups.[200] The goal was to release an album of music that might influence more Asian Americans to vote in the 2016 presidential election.

The album was released on September 6, one month before the 2016 election, and the proceeds from the album were donated to 18MillionRising, an organization promoting Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) "civic engagement, influence, and movement by leveraging the power of technology and social media."[201] All of the music on the album is by Asian American artists or Asian American-led bands, though the songs are in a number of music genres including hip hop, indie rock, and fusion music like Red Baraat.

Jain chose to contribute the song "Halla Bol," which translates to "Raise your voice." The phrase has been associated with political and resistance movements since at least 1989, when Indian activist and playwright Safdar Hashmi was attacked and murdered while performing his

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n&utm_term=.d6ecf144a19f.

[197] Alcindor, "How People of Color Occupy Wall Street."

[198] Kenyon Farrow, "Occupy Wall Street's Race Problem," *The American Prospect*, pub. October 24, 2011, https://prospect.org/article/occupy-wall-streets-race-problem.

[199] Patton, "Why Blacks Aren't Embracing Occupy Wall Street."

[200] Jens Manuel Krogstad, "Asian American Voter Turnout Lags behind Other Groups; Some Non-Voters Say They're 'Too Busy'," *Pew Research Center*, pub, April 9, 2014, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/04/09/asian-american-voter-turnout-lags-behind-other-groups-some-non-voters-say-theyre-too-busy/.

[201] Various Artists, *Voices of Our Vote*, 18 Million Rising, digital album, September 6, 2016, https://voicesofourvote.org/.

play of the same name in support of a worker's strike in New Delhi.[202] The phrase, "Halla Bol," has subsequently been used in numerous anti-government or anti-establishment protests throughout India.

The Red Baraat song is a fast, driving song, nearly five-and-a-half minutes long. The first minute and a half alternates between a long, klezmer and Indian-influenced brass melody, and shouts of "Bol, bol, bol, Halla Bol," and "Raise Your Voice!" After this head, the baritone saxophone plays an extended solo, followed by a return to the opening head twice. Between these two head sections is a short Hindi call-and-response section led by Jain. The piece ends with a short outro. In typical Red Baraat fashion, the piece is upbeat and joyful, meant to instill energy in the listener, and in the context of this album, to get them to go to the polls and vote.

Jain promoted the album on Red Baraat's Facebook and Twitter pages in the weeks leading up to the election, encouraging fans to buy and listen to it. He even encouraged fans to participate in an online album listening party on September 21, 2016, and to "share what tracks move you to turn out to the ballot box this November."[203] Although it is impossible to know whether or not the album did influence anyone to vote who otherwise would not have, AAPI voter turnout did improve in the 2016 election by more than half over the previous election cycle, with Indian American voter turnout increasing the most.[204] It is suspected that this was largely due to targeted outreach toward Asian Americans, to which projects like *Voices of Our Vote* contributed.

The Festival of Colors and the Power of Creating Joy

In 2012, Jain began an annual series of concerts featuring Red Baraat and other South Asian artists called the Festival of Colors (FOC). Loosely based on the holiday *Holi*, he wanted to create an arts festival that celebrates "South Asian artistry and South Asian diaspora in America."[205] *Holi* is a two-day Hindu festival meant to usher in the spring, although since it is based on the lunar calendar, it usually occurs sometime in the spring. Typically, people celebrate by throwing colored powder all over each other. Jain had grown up celebrating *Holi*: a common practice among many non-Hindus of Indian origin, similar to how many non-Christians celebrate Christmas in a secular fashion.

Originally, Jain's idea was for a variety of musicians, filmmakers, dancers, and visual artists to present their work in different US cities under the FOC banner in order to foster a broader sense of community between South Asian Americans, and to showcase the diversity of talent within the community. For example, in 2015, the festival screened Prashant Bhargava's

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[202] Ram Rahman, "Modes of Resistance in India: Sahmant's Experiments in Dissent," *Marg: A Magazine of the Arts* 69, no. 3 (2018): 28-37.
[203] Red Baraat, "Tune in this Wednesday evening 9/21," Facebook, September 21, 2016. https://www.facebook.com/plugins/post.php?href=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Fredbaraatband%2Fposts%2F10153964085033481.
[204] Karthick Ramakrishnan, "The Asian American Vote in 2016: Record Gains, but also Gaps," AAPI Data, posted May 19, 2017, http://aapidata.com/blog/voting-gains-gaps/.
[205] Sunny Jain, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, May 5, 2017.

short film *Radhe Radhe: Rites of Holi*, which features an orchestral score by Vijay Iyer, as well as a performance by Rupa and the April Fishes. In 2016, L.A.-based hip hop artist and drummer Madame Gandhi performed.

The Festival of Colors, then, allows Jain and Red Baraat to expose their crowds to the broad range of artistic work that South Asians do, which is especially valuable given that – as discussed in more detail in Chapter 1 – Punjabi culture serves as the default for what defines South Asian food (palak paneer, chicken tikka masala, aloo gobhi), music (*bhangra*), and culture (having a *sangeet*[206] before an Indian wedding) in the West. This is largely because Punjabis were among the first South Asians to emigrate to the United States and Britain, where they opened businesses and started forming communities.[207] Since Red Baraat draws upon a lot of Punjabi influences because of Jain's own Punjabi background, Jain invites South Asians doing non-Punjabi influenced music to the Festival of Colors in order to showcase more of what the South Asian American community has to offer.

I attended one FOC show in 2017 at The Hamilton, in Washington, D.C. This particular show opened with vocalist Ganavya and rock band The Kominas. Jain told me that for the last couple of years, he mostly programmed musicians because venues were often reluctant to make accommodations needed to feature non-musician artists, claiming that the logistics were too difficult to pull off. Nevertheless, the 2017 FOC still managed to showcase a diverse array of South Asian musicians: the Kominas punk-influenced indie rock was loud and aggressive, starkly contrasting Ganavya's quiet and soulful jazz and Carnatic-influenced vocals. Red Baraat rounded out the show with a full set.

The show at the Hamilton was particularly memorable because of the rowdy crowd. Red Baraat audiences are typically lively, but the energy this particular night was unique compared to any of the other dozen or more Red Baraat shows I attended in that year. A larger majority of the crowd was South Asian than other shows I went to, which Jain informed me was typical in D.C. During and after the "Shruggy Ji" dance contest, nearly twenty audience members ended up on the stage, only five of whom had been invited to be there (pictured below). The audience was jumping up and down and flailing about on the dance floor more vigorously and enthusiastically that I had ever seen, and at one point, I had to ask a man in front of me to be more aware of the space behind him, as I found myself repeatedly dodging his elbow so it would not hit me in the face. Although I enjoyed myself, I did find it overwhelming as a short, petite woman among a dense, taller crowd.

[206] A night of music and dance before a Hindu wedding. This tradition, primarily a Punjabi and Gujarati one, has spread in the diaspora because of Punjabi influences.
[207] Sucheta Mazumdar, "Colonial Impact and Punjabi Emigration to the United States," in *Labor Immigration Under Capitalism: Asian Workers in the United States Before World War II*, ed. Lucie Cheng and Edna Bonacich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 316-36.

Figure 3.2 Red Baraat at the Hamilton with numerous audience members on the stage on March 25, 2017.

I was also particularly surprised by the rowdiness given the venue. The Hamilton is similar to the famous jazz club, Yoshi's, in Oakland, California, as it is a relatively upscale dinner and music venue that Jain described to me as "bougie."[208] Although the crowd was wilder than usual, Jain told me that he was glad the security team did not intervene too much that night. At previous shows at the Hamilton, security had reacted swiftly and violently, forcibly removing drinks from peoples' hands and ejecting anyone from the venue who was perceived to be causing trouble. Jain told me he had talked to the venue owner after that, telling him that "there's a tactful way of keeping that more hidden" and that it contributed to an undesirable atmosphere at the show.[209] By removing people from their previous show at the Hamilton, the security guards had prevented Red Baraat from connecting with the audience and creating joy. The owner of the Hamilton agreed that their new security team had gone overboard and arranged to scale back security responses at future shows.

One of Red Baraat's most powerful capacities, as trumpet player Sonny Singh has told me, is nurturing this jubilant atmosphere. Singh told me that playing with Red Baraat over the last decade has helped him understand how important that ability is: "The value of being creators of joy in the times that we're living in right now, I think it's a pretty powerful thing…. Red Baraat is by no means a utopia, but sometimes at our best, you have a feeling of joy that is that [makes you think]: this is like what the world I want to live in sounds like and feels like."[210] Jain told me that this audience connection, this mutual enjoyment and exchange of dialogue, is the primary reason Red Baraat still exists. In fact, he admitted, "Once the enjoyment is gone, I don't want to do it…. I don't do this for the sake of money. We're not getting rich off of doing this stuff."[211] Instead, the joy derived from doing this work is what makes the instability of being a touring musician worthwhile.[212]

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[208] As in "bourgeoisie."
[209] Sunny Jain, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, May 5, 2017.
[210] Sonny Singh, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, May 9, 2017.
[211] Sunny Jain, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, May 5, 2017.
[212] I was not able to determine how much of Jain's living is from his musical pursuits, but I suspect that at least part of Jain's relative economic stability is because of his wife's work as a physician. I do not mean to suggest that he is not contributing significantly to his household, but rather that having a two-income household has significant advantages.

For Singh, this realization was profound because as a freelance social justice educator and facilitator, he spends a lot of time dealing with his clients' and his own negative emotions surrounding injustice and inequity in the world. Often, he feels hopeless when he thinks about the large-scale changes that need to happen in order to achieve racial equity. He did not realize the power or value in spreading joy until Red Baraat audience members began reaching out to him after shows, relaying to him how inspired and energized they were by the band's work. He has found these moments especially poignant in shows that have taken place directly after disturbing events, such as the acquittal of George Zimmerman in Trayvon Martin's death and the shooting at the Oak Creek *gurdwara* (Sikh temple). The band had to perform the same nights as both of these events in 2012, and Singh was able to find release, elation, and hope through playing with Red Baraat, even if only temporarily in the space of performance.

Jain, Singh, and the other members of Red Baraat are not the only people to recognize the radical potential of creating joy. Collective experiences of joy, in particular, have the ability to energize and move people to action. In an interview about socialist movements he was part of in the 1970s, Marxist philosopher Antonio Negri stated that "Joy operates by means of a mechanism of experience, a process, a way in which the relation between the world and oneself can always be changed."[213] Negri is suggesting that joy can inspire movement, or at the very least make people believe in the possibility of change, which can be powerful in and of itself because people who believe change is possible are less likely to become overwhelmed in the face of difficult odds. In "Social Movements and the Focus of Emotional Attention," sociologist Randall Collins expands on the Durkheimian notion of collective effervescence in social rituals and movements, pointing out how collective emotions like joy can "spill over and become outwardly directed" into spaces beyond a protest, or in this case, the concert hall.[214] Although he admits that this energy is ephemeral, rarely lasting more than a couple of days after an event, successful social movements help sustain themselves by being able to recreate those dynamics time and again.

In fact, spreading joy has been used as a tactic in the Black Lives Matter movement more recently in order to draw attention to positive images of Black people in the United States. In 2013, CaShawn Thompson created the hashtag "#BlackGirlMagic" as a way to popularize discussions of successful Black women.[215] A few years later, a similar hashtag, "#BlackBoyJoy," was also popularized.[216] Although these social media campaigns were partially created in order

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[213] Antonio Negri and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Negri on Negri*, trans. by M.B. DeBevoise (New York: Routledge, 2004), 20.
[214] Randall Collins, "Social Movements and the Focus of Emotional Attention," in *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*, ed. Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009), 32.
[215] Dexter Thomas, "Why Everyone's Saying 'Black Girls are Magic,'" *The Los Angeles Times*, pub. September 9, 2015, https://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-nn-everyones-saying-black-girls-are-magic-20150909-htmlstory.html.
[216] Danielle Young, "Thanks to Chance the Rapper, #BlackBoyJoy Is a Thing," *The Root*, pub. August 30, 2016, https://www.theroot.com/thanks-to-chance-the-rapper- blackboyjoy-is-a-thing-1790856549.

to call out the predominantly non-Black media about the fact that the number of negative portrayals of Black people significantly outweighs positive ones, these movements have been even more important for Black people by creating a space for them to understand, highlight, and celebrate their accomplishments in the face of unfavorable odds. For the members of Red Baraat, playing their shows serve a similar function: they present a pluralistic vision of Americanness that is rarely acknowledged or marketed as American, and by insisting on this vision, they spread joy. Learning that the audience could feel that joy being transmitted, Singh told me, helped him understand that how joy serves a vital function, motivating people to sustain social justice movements.

It is for these reasons that it bothers Jain and Singh when journalists describe Red Baraat as a "multi-culti party band."[217]Although the band is multicultural and their shows are boisterous, the work they do is more substantive and meaningful than this kind of reduction conveys. Some of their songs, such as Jain's "Halla Bol," discussed earlier and Sonny Singh's composition, "Se Hace Camino," are clear calls for political engagement. At the same time, I can see how it would be easy to miss these political messages. The celebratory atmosphere is clearly front and center at their shows, but I have never seen Jain speak in concert about the political messages behind their songs. Released on their 2017 album *Bhangra Pirates*, "Se Hace Camino" sounds like a 1990s ska-punk song, with simple harmonies placed over fast, syncopated rhythms in the brass section. The lyrics are written in English and Spanish, and the song features Jain and Singh singing in harmony the following chorus: "Todo el mundo puede cambiar / Se hace camino al andar[218] / We make the road by walking." The lyrics send a clear message, telling listeners that in order to create a new, more equitable world, everyone must be willing to pave new paths forward.

In the studio recording, the feel of the song remains the same throughout, but in live performances I saw throughout my year of fieldwork, the band would launch into an extended unmetered free improvisation in the middle of the song. Following the improvisation, Jain would signal a return to the chorus, this time changing the feel to a standard *bhangra* rhythm, as notated in a simplified version below (also featured in Chapter 2). *Dhol* scholar Gibb Schreffler states that among *dhol* players in the diaspora, this rhythm is known as the *cāl* rhythm[219]:

[217] Sonny Singh, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, May 9, 2017.
[218] "The whole world can change / We make the road by walking." Translation by author.
[219] Schreffler, "Signs of Separation," 563.

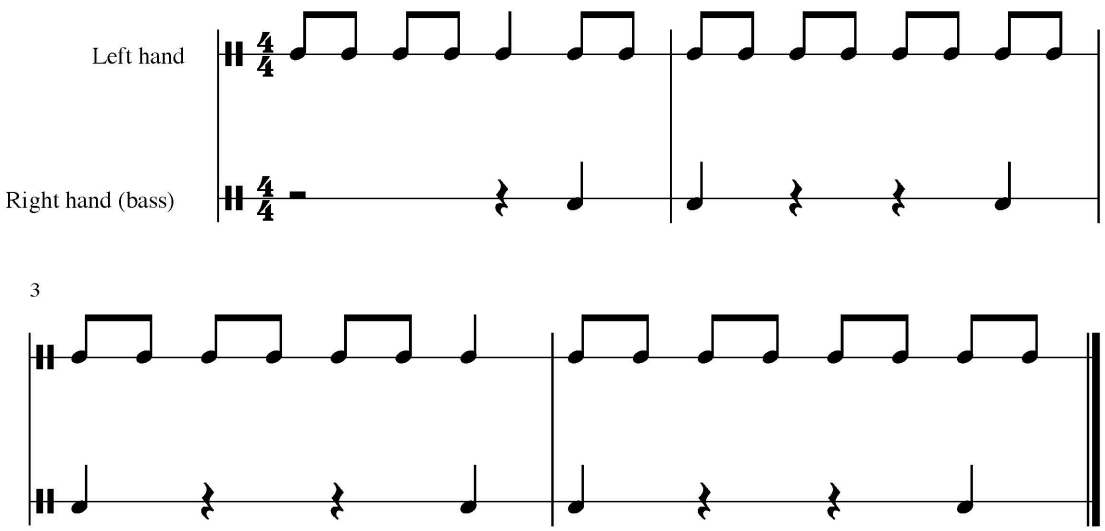

Figure 3.3 Simplified bhangra Cāl rhythm, to be played with a swung feel.[220]

This change in feel only lasts for half a minute, but it is just long enough to remind the audience that the band's Punjabi roots are never far away. The song quickly returns to the ska-punk feel after this diversion to end.

The musical and lyrical references are multifaceted in this song. Singh's lyrics were inspired by his study of Zapatistas[221] during his undergraduate career in Latin American history. Musically, the song harkens back to ska-punk and reggae that became popular in the 1990s in the United States with bands like Rancid, Operation Ivy, and early No Doubt. These bands fostered close relationships between themselves and their audience, and they also frequently drew upon early punk values by promoting social justice and resistance to institutions.[222] In this way, in addition to being an upbeat song, "Se Hace Camino" is a clear and unapologetic call to action.

Conclusion

Sunny Jain's music career is acutely informed by his understanding of Jain concepts that he learned as a child, most notably pluralism, or *anekāntavāda*. He demonstrates pluralism by incorporating diverse sounds into his compositions and arrangements, playing with racially diverse musicians, and programming diverse musical groups with which to share billings. He creates connections with his audiences, writing joyful songs that often have political messages meant to inspire others to adopt these same ethical values. In this chapter, I have argued that *anekāntavāda* is not a simplistic or utopic concept, although it may seem so on the surface. Instead, I align myself with scholars who contend that *anekāntavāda* has a deep and substantial

[220] Transcription by author.
[221] Zapatistas are a group of leftist socialists in Chiapas, Mexico that, since 1994, have been in conflict with the Mexican government about indigenous rights to their land. For more, see Peter Rosset, María Elena Martínez-Torres, and Luis Hernandez-Navarro, "Zapatismo in the Movement of Movements," *Development* 48, no. 2 (2005): 35-41.
[222] Andy Bennett, "Punk's Not Dead: The Continuing Significance of Punk Rock for an Older Generation of Fans," *Sociology* 40, no. 2 (2006): 219-235.

ethical history in Jainism that involves valuing diversity in all its forms: in ideas, in dialogue, and in living beings. At times consciously and unconsciously, Sunny Jain draws upon this ethical history in performance, temporarily creating pockets of space and time in which this diversity coexists.

Thus far, I have written about two Punjabi American artists who incorporate aspects of *bhangra*, a music that developed into its contemporary form in the South Asian diaspora, with other forms of western music such as hip hop, pop, rock, and jazz. Both Malhotra and Jain's social justice advocacy is, in significant part, generated by creating joyful atmospheres in party-like settings. Their methods of and reasons for doing so, however, are quite different. While Malhotra's Basement Bhangra was more explicitly political throughout most of its twenty-year history, Jain's political motives and messages are subtler. Although both build coalitions with artists and communities outside of the South Asian American community, a significant portion of their social justice organizing is around issues that directly affect South Asian Americans. Additionally, a significant portion of their fan bases, especially in New York City, are of South Asian descent.

In the final two chapters, I profile Vijay Iyer and Rupa Marya, two Indian American artists who are even more outspoken in their racial politics, whose racial justice advocacy is largely oriented around non-South Asian American communities, and whose fans are predominantly White. I explore the social justice work they do, but also highlight contradictions, conflicts, and roadblocks that emerge as they work to improve the lives of communities of color.

Chapter 4: Listening as Empathy: Confronting Race in Vijay Iyer's Musical Practice

Introduction

In 2012, when I first began researching and writing about Vijay Iyer for my master's thesis at the University of North Texas, he was well-regarded as a jazz pianist in New York City, having released over fifteen albums as either a leader or co-leader. His albums received regular critical acclaim, and he toured frequently throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe. That year, he won a Doris Duke Performing Artist Award, and he had previously won numerous other accolades in the jazz world and in the New York arts' scene. He was nominated for a Grammy award in 2011, and his albums frequently appeared on Album of the Year lists in major publications like *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *DownBeat Magazine*, and *The Los Angeles Times*, among others. In other words, Iyer was certainly not an unknown figure in the music world, especially within jazz and improvised music scenes.

To say that his life has changed dramatically since then, however, is not an understatement. In 2013, Iyer was hired with tenure at Harvard University, to be the first professor of jazz on the music faculty. A few months later, he was awarded a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship, unofficially known as the MacArthur "Genius Grant." Not only did these events increase his visibility among mainstream media, but they also gave Iyer more social capital and financial stability than he had ever had before. Suddenly, as Iyer told me in the Fall of 2016, he had "an extremely privileged and pretty safely ensconced position for the foreseeable future."[223]

That same year, Iyer also began experiencing a significant shift in the way he thought about his performance and participation in the jazz world. Before 2013, Iyer was widely known as *the* successful South Asian American jazz pianist. His heritage was nearly always highlighted in article and interview titles, meant to point to the supposedly novel, and perhaps exotic, presence of an acclaimed jazz musician of Indian heritage. Iyer was proud of being South Asian American, even if he sometimes felt bitter about the disproportionate attention music critics and listeners paid to his ethnicity, rather than to his musical offerings. He often (though not always), explored ideas from Carnatic and Hindustani classical music, sometimes playing with and building on Indian *raga* (loosely melodic modes or scales), *tala* (rhythm cycles), or other Indian rhythmic and melodic ideas and patterns. He collaborated frequently with another decorated Indian American jazz artist, saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa, with whom he released eight albums between 2000-2007. At the same time, Iyer always resisted being labeled an exclusively Indo-American jazz musician, because like Sunny Jain, discussed in the previous chapter, he does not draw upon Indian influences all (or even most) of the time, and when he does, it is a genuine expression of his experiences as a South Asian American. He always made sure to emphasize to journalists that his engagement with Indian musical ideas was more conceptual, taking care to explain that he is not formally trained in Indian music, but rather draws upon Indian music for inspiration. For Iyer, what was equally important to expressing his South Asian Americanness, was making sure to pay homage to the predominantly African American artists

[223] Vijay Iyer, interview by author, New York, NY, September 6, 2016.

from whom he learned his musical skills, with whom he collaborated, and to whose legacies he owed his own success.

Although pre-2013 Iyer always acknowledged his Black mentors in interviews and at concerts, he did not think about his positionality as an acclaimed non-Black jazz musician quite as critically as he did after George Zimmerman was acquitted for the murder of the unarmed Black teenager Trayvon Martin. The acquittal was announced on July 13, 2013, and it caused Iyer to reconsider his approach to public presentation. He explained to me in 2016:

> [I]t's not that I wasn't conscious [of injustices against African American communities] before, but it kind of reoriented my priorities. Because that will not happen to me; it won't happen to my daughter; it won't happen to anyone in our [South Asian American] community in that way. That's not to say there's no violence against South Asians. I mean, there's plenty, but not like that, and not in a way that it's excused. So, I already knew all of that, but … [the acquittal] was really one of the most visceral shocks to my sense of self as an American that I've ever felt. It was almost as serious as 9/11.[224]

Iyer was in Berlin on tour with his trio, made up of bassist Stephan Crump and drummer Tyshawn Sorrey, when the acquittal occurred. During the tour, he had begun writing music for an upcoming project with Trio 3 (made up of saxophonist Oliver Lake, bassist Reggie Workman, and drummer Andrew Cyrille), which eventually became the piece *Suite for Trayvon (And Thousands More)*, released on the 2014 Trio 3 album *Wiring*. He told me that playing shows and writing music in remembrance of Trayvon felt like a small thing he could do.

As the Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum and acquittal after acquittal came for killers of other unarmed Black people, mostly White authority figures, Iyer became more acutely aware of the extent of racial injustice experienced by the Black community. He began to reorient conversations with journalists away from talking about his South Asian American identity and its relation to his music, and instead made a more conscious effort to talk about African American musicians' politics. As he told me, "I won't say I stopped caring, but I stopped prioritizing Asian Americanness and made it more about what I can do as somebody who's benefitted. And you know, being hired with tenure at Harvard as *the* jazz guy, or however they saw it, that's a great responsibility." This great responsibility was to use his positions of privilege – as Harvard's first professor of jazz, and as a MacArthur Fellow – to redirect attention to systemic injustices against the Black community.

This responsibility was and is, for Iyer, important for at least two major reasons. First, jazz, the idiom for which Iyer is best known (although he also writes contemporary classical/art music, hip hop, and electronic music), emerged from and developed predominantly in African American communities. Although there are vibrant communities of jazz practitioners around the world, its beginnings are deeply situated in the US South at the turn of the twentieth century, and Black artists instigated most major developments in jazz, particularly through the 1960s.[225] As

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[224] Vijay Iyer, interview by author, New York, NY, September 6, 2016.

[225] See, for example, Ingrid Monson,"The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological*

Scott DeVeaux wrote in his seminal article, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition," "Jazz is strongly identified with African-American culture" because both the techniques and the musical expressions are "uniquely rooted in, the experience of black Americans."[226] As a participant in this musical tradition, Iyer sees himself and other jazz practitioners as having a moral responsibility to recall and disseminate this history: because its social context is the major common factor in defining what jazz is, even more so than its musical characteristics. Even though jazz is studied, taught, and performed throughout the world by non-African Americans, for Iyer and his mentors, understanding the African American roots of jazz, and even more, understanding jazz as having a history of resistance to the status quo, is essential to doing the music justice.

The second reason Iyer feels it is his responsibility to express solidarity with Black Americans is because Asian Americans have sometimes been complicit in perpetuating anti-Blackness, both consciously and unconsciously. Scholar Wen Liu has recently written about Asian American participation in pushing for neoconservative color-blind political agendas[227] in the context of contrasting Asian American responses to the shooting of the Black New Yorker Akai Gurley by Chinese American police officer Peter Liang, in 2014.[228] While some Asian American groups attempted to strengthen coalitional ties to African American communities, others perpetuated antiblackness by "refusing to acknowledge the significance of race in the Black body politic."[229] In other words, some Asian Americans tried to pretend as though the fact that Gurley is Black had no bearing on the case because structural racism did not exist.[230] Liu

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Society 48, no. 3 (1995): 396-422; Imamu Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow, 1963); John Lowney, *Jazz Internationalism* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017); David Ake, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and Daniel Goldmark, eds., *Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and its Boundaries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); and Scott DeVeaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography," *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 3 (1991): 525-60.

[226] DeVeaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition," 528-29.

[227] Charles A. Gallagher notes that proponents of "neoconservative color-blind agendas" wish to remove race as a factor for consideration when analyzing a political situation. In other words, they believe that "racial equity is now the norm, while simultaneously ignoring or discounting the real and ongoing ways in which institutional racism continues to disadvantage racial minorities" (40). Asian Americans are often held up as an example of a minority group that has done well, thereby (in the mind of the neoconservative) proving that racial inequities have no structural cause (49). From Charles A. Gallagher, "Color-Blind Egalitarianism as the New Racial Norm," in *Theories of Race and Ethnicity: Contemporary Debates and Perspectives*, ed. Karim Murji and John Solomos (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 40-56.

[228] Wen Liu, "Complicity and Resistance: Asian American Body Politics in Black Lives Matter," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 21, no. 3 (2018): 421-51.

[229] Ibid., 435.

[230] There are also Asian Americans who believed that racism is a factor in why Liang was charged and convicted of manslaughter, when numerous White police officers have not been charged for similar incidents. See, for example, New York State Senator John Liu, discussing this position: "As Officer Who Killed Akai Gurley Gets No Jail Time, Asian Americans Debate

argues that this attempt to endorse a postracial agenda is actually a continuation of a longer history of Asian American antiblackness. In this history, Asian Americans "remove themselves from broader racial justice remands and functions" which "allows Asian Americans to bargain for partial privileges that previously belonged to whites."[231] This has been termed "Asian uplift" by scholar Helen Jun, wherein Asian Americans are held up as "idealized subjects of a neoliberal world order" at the expense of Black bodies.[232] Rather than making race irrelevant, this tactic actually strengthens White domination because Asian Americans start to understand achievement and success in relation to White American standards.

Complicating things further in the context of this dissertation is the fact that antiblackness within South Asian communities, both on the subcontinent and in the diaspora, has its own difficult history. As I discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, casteism and antiblackness cannot be disentwined in a South Asian American context, because higher-caste South Asians associate darker skin with lower statuses.[233] Most often, this antiblackness manifests in seemingly benign ways, like discouraging South Asian children to spend time in the sun for fear that their skin will darken too much. This fear of darkness, however, can easily manifest in an unconscious distrust of dark people in general. Iyer believes he has a responsibility to work to dismantle these complicated racist structures in his role as a successful South Asian American practitioner of Black musical traditions.

As Iyer stated in a 2014 speech for Asian American alumni at his alma mater, Yale University, one of his main goals as an artist has been to be "a consistent, un-ignorable, complicating presence in the landscape of culture. As African American innovators like Paul Robeson, Nina Simone, John Coltrane, and Jimi Hendrix found, in the face of a culture that would deny them, it becomes necessary for an artist of color in the West to defiantly announce to the world: I am a fact."[234]

In this chapter, I tease out the complexity of this statement. I ask: what does it mean for Iyer to compare his own struggle to those of African Americans like Robeson, Simone, Coltrane, and Hendrix? How does Iyer understand his plight as similar to and different from theirs? In what ways did Iyer reorient his practice as a musician in the wake of Zimmerman's acquittal and the formation of the Black Lives Matter movement? And how, exactly, does Iyer assert that he is "a fact"?

Role of White Supremacy," Democracy Now!, video, 25:10, April 21, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=skRk35P1q4g.

[231] Liu, "Complicity and Resistance," 435.

[232] Helen H. Jun, *Race for Citizenship: Black Orientalism and Asian Uplift from Pre-Emancipation to Neoliberal America* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 9.

[233] Shaista Patel, "Complicating the Tale of 'Two Indians': Mapping 'South Asian' Complicity in White Settler Colonialism Along the Axis of Caste and Anti-Blackness," *Theory & Event* 19, no. 4 (2016): Project MUSE, muse.jhu.edu/article/633278, accessed July 19, 2019.

[234] Vijay Iyer, "Our Complicity with Excess," *The Margins*, pub May 7, 2014, https://aaww.org/complicity-with-excess-vijay-iyer/.

In order to answer these questions, I will begin with a brief section outlining Iyer's background and path to becoming a professional musician. Although I have written a more detailed description of this path in my previous work on Iyer, this shortened version provides the necessary background in order to understand how and why 2013 was such a pivotal year for how and why he reframed his work. Next, I will discuss Iyer's post-2013 coalitional politics. How, why, and with whom does Iyer form and maintain political and musical alliances? Deeply embedded within this context is Iyer's relation to Whiteness. As a musician and professor who is often working in predominantly White spaces, how does Iyer understand his relation to Whiteness? In this chapter, I argue that Iyer uses his privileged status to reorient his primarily White audiences' attention toward confronting racial injustices in Black and Brown communities in the United States, and that he does so with the knowledge of and sensitivity toward the differences between South Asian American and African American racialization, though not always without inconsistencies. In fact, this chapter, like this dissertation in general, paints a complex picture of a complex and sometimes contradictory human being. Iyer is self-aware, but also unapologetic. He is self-deprecating at times, and overly confident other times. He wields his privilege uncomfortably but effectively. While he refuses to label himself an activist because he does not use a grassroots approach, it is difficult to characterize some of his choices as anything but a form of activism, or at the very least, social justice advocacy. In this way, Iyer is another example in this dissertation of an individual who uses his success and privilege strategically to bolster support for those who have never had the same social status.

The final sections of the chapter include three case studies of how Iyer demonstrates his commitment to highlighting Blackness as a way of asserting his own "undeniable presence" as a South Asian American musician. The first case study details the opening night of a three-night series at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2014, wherein at the last minute, Iyer decided to stage a die-in to draw attention to protests happening just outside of the theater, occupied by mostly wealthy, White, Brooklynites. In the second case study, I analyze the recorded version of Iyer's *Suite for Trayvon (And Thousands More)* with Trio 3. Lastly, I focus on two concert series curated by Iyer at SF Jazz in 2017 and 2018, during his tenure as artistic director. These three case studies demonstrate several ways Iyer uses creative practice to disrupt status quo in spaces where White people routinely, as Iyer has put it, use creative culture made by people of color as "something white people could wear, collect, or otherwise incorporate into white subjectivity."[235]

Early Musical Background

Iyer was born in 1971 in Albany, New York, and raised primarily in a suburb of Rochester. His parents, who came to the United States from the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, were among the first large wave of South Asian immigrants after the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. In Rochester, Iyer grew up within a small community of other Hindu South Indians, through which he was exposed to South Indian music, art, and Hindu rituals. Although he did not engage deeply with these traditions as a child, he now views these experiences as essential to his early development as a jazz musician because in order to find his voice as a professional musician, he found that he needed to grapple with his own ethnic background.

[235] Iyer, "Our Complicity with Excess."

Iyer began taking classical violin lessons beginning at the age of 3, continuing to study seriously through high school. Although his older sister studied classical piano from a young age, Iyer did not formally study piano at all through his childhood. Instead, he began improvising, learning popular songs from the radio by ear. In high school, he started to develop an interest in jazz, and despite his lack of formal training, he was accepted into the school's jazz band as a pianist on the condition that he seek out private jazz theory lessons. His jazz theory teacher, Andy Calabrese, lent him jazz records, which Iyer eagerly absorbed. Throughout his early jazz education, Iyer continued to study classical violin. He also excelled in his academic pursuits, and went on to attend Yale University after high school, where he majored in math and physics.

It was during his sophomore year at Yale that Iyer stopped playing violin entirely, and began dedicating more time to jazz piano. He would use his free time to write and arrange music for small groups and ensembles, playing shows in and around the university. By the time he graduated from Yale, he was still unsure that anyone would take him seriously as a jazz musician. Although he had familiarized himself with jazz history through his high school and college studies, he was not yet very aware of the depth of the racial politics that defined the musical tradition.

In 1992, when Iyer was accepted into a PhD program in physics at the University of California, Berkeley, he relocated west in 1992 for his doctoral studies and began networking in the local arts scene, building relationships with musician-academics like David Wessel,[236] musicians like drummer Donald Bailey,[237] and the Asian American arts collective Asian Improv aRts, formed by musicians Fred Ho, Jon Jang, Francis Wong, and Mark Izu, among others.[238] This is when Iyer first began to explore jazz more deeply in relation to its Black historical roots. It is also where he finally decided to pursue music as a career. In his first year at Berkeley, Iyer won a jazz piano competition and finally realized that music could be a viable career for him. His musical pursuits began taking up more and more of his time until, in 1994, he realized that he no longer wished to continue his PhD in physics.

Instead, with the support of music faculty member David Wessel, Iyer created a PhD in music perception and cognition that he could pursue while continuing to build his music career. His major research questions asked about how we hear, process, and literally *feel* music in our bodies. Embodied cognition "proposes that the body is involved in thinking, and that the perception of rhythm is itself a form of intelligence,"[239] but the way it is perceived is shaped by culture. As fellow Harvard professor and ethnomusicologist Ingrid Monson put it:

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[236] David Wessel was a UC Berkeley composition faculty member and well-known computer music artist who passed away in 2014. He was the head of Berkeley's Center for New Music and Audio Technologies (CNMAT).
[237] 1933-2013. Known as "Duck" Bailey, best known as the drummer of the Jimmy Smith Trio.
[238] Asian Improv aRts (AIR) was formed in 1987 "to produce, present and document artistic works that represent the Asian American experience" (http://www.asianimprov.org/about). They also have a small independent record label that released Iyer's first two albums, *Memorophilia* (1995) and *Architextures* (1998).
[239] Alec Wilkinson, "Time is a Ghost: Vijay Iyer's Jazz Vision," *The New Yorker*, pub. January 24, 2016, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/02/01/time-is-a-ghost.

> 'Vijay's dissertation was one of the first to talk about embodied cognition. It foreshadowed development of a now prominent direction in musical studies, called "embodiment studies." The field is less interested in scores and musical theory and more in the cognitive and embodied underpinnings of music.'[240]

In other words, Iyer was among the first academics in music to insist on breaking down the mind/body dichotomy in understanding how and why music is a significant artistic and social practice among human beings. However, this idea, as Iyer discusses in his dissertation, actually grew from his understanding of West African and African American traditions of embodied musicking.[241] As will become clear in this chapter, the relations between culture, cognition, and bodily manifestations of music continue to influence Iyer's thinking about his own musical practice, cultural belonging, and racial politics.

Along with developing a stronger understanding of the racial dimensions of jazz history, Iyer began to grapple seriously with his identity as an Indian American in jazz in the Bay Area. He credits his involvement with Asian Improv aRts (AIR) for opening his eyes to ways of forming community oriented around art as activism. Members of the collective were questioning how to place themselves within American traditions, especially African American traditions like jazz, in ways that respected the different histories of both Asian American and African American communities. As Iyer explained in a 2016 *New Yorker* profile, he learned that "situating myself in relation to that history was what mattered. It wasn't about me trying to sound black. It was me figuring out my relationship to those histories."[242] In the mid-1990s, around the same time as he increased his involvement with AIR, Iyer was introduced to saxophonist Steve Coleman.[243] Coleman frequently draws on West African polyrhythms in his own work, and he encouraged Iyer to find his own voice in jazz. Although Iyer did not show any great interest in Indian music through childhood, with encouragement from his AIR colleagues and Coleman,[244] he began going to North and South Indian classical music concerts that were put on by the well-established South Asian American community in the Bay Area, which had grown substantially between the 1970s and 1990s. Many highly educated post-1965 South Asian immigrants settled on the Peninsula, working as engineers to propel the expansion of Silicon Valley. As described in Chapter 1, these immigrants established cultural and religious organizations, including music

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[240] Wilkinson, "Time is a Ghost."
[241] Vijay Iyer, "Microstructures of Feel, Macrostructures of Sound: Embodied Cognition in West African and African-American Musics" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1998).
[242] Wilkinson, "Time is a Ghost."
[243] Steve Coleman, born in 1956, is an alto saxophonist and MacArthur Fellow (2014) who has had an impressive career spanning nearly forty years. In October of 2018, he was accused of sexual misconduct by a former student who was inspired to share her story because of the #MeToo movement. Coleman has denied these allegations and filed a defamation lawsuit in retaliation. As of the writing of this footnote in July 2019, it is unclear what the outcome of these cases will be.
[244] According to his website, Coleman has studied South Indian classical (Carnatic) music since the late 1990s, taking several trips to India along with his music collective, M-Base (https://m-base.com/biography/).

organizations. Iyer began learning some basic Indian classical music concepts, like *raga* and *tala*, by attending these concerts, and soon started experimenting with using these concepts in his own compositions and improvisations. This period of learning was instrumental in developing his confidence in his individual voice.

It was through Coleman that Iyer also met Indian American saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa.[245] Mahanthappa and Iyer, born in the same year, immediately bonded over their South Indian backgrounds, their interest in jazz, and their desire to create jazz that reflected the fullness of their identities. Their bond grew close, and they spent over a decade releasing eight albums together (some of which were released under Iyer's name, others under Mahanthappa's) on which they explored different facets of these identities. On Mahanthappa's 2004 album, *Mother Tongue*, for example, each composition is titled after an Indian language, which was transcribed into a musical representation by Mahanthappa. These transcriptions were used as the starting melodic material over which the musicians would then improvise. Although Iyer and Mahanthappa no longer release albums or tour together often, they still play together occasionally in projects with Pakistani-American guitarist Rez Abbasi. In 2012 conversations I had with them, they each describe their years of playing together frequently as significant in terms of both personal and professional development in the music industry, since South Asian Americans in jazz were scarce at the time.

Less than a year after completing his dissertation in 1998, Iyer moved to New York City, where he settled permanently. As city had – and has – the largest and most active jazz music scene in the United States, Iyer quickly developed close relationships with musicians in improvised music circles there, meeting some people through the relationship he had already developed with mentor and collaborator, Steve Coleman. Mahanthappa had also moved to New York around the same time, and Iyer soon met bassist Stephan Crump, drummers Tyshawn Sorey and Marcus Gilmore, saxophonist Steve Lehman, and many more. He has released an average of one album per year since then, serving as a sideman on numerous other projects. From the beginning, his albums have received critical acclaim, but it was 2009's *Historicity*, his first trio album with Crump and Gilmore, that brought Iyer more widespread acclaim than ever before. His 2012 album *Accelerando* similarly received huge accolades, appearing on numerous best of the year lists in major publications like *The New York Times*.

Moreover, in New York, Iyer began to expand his work outside of the jazz world. In 2003, Iyer collaborated with poet and hip hop artist Mike Ladd for the first time, releasing *In What Language?*, a series of pieces based on the experience of Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi, who, en route to Buenos Aires from Hong Kong, was wrongfully detained on a stopover in New York City in April 2001 by the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service). Panahi knew he was being unfairly racially profiled, but because he refused to be photographed and fingerprinted, he was sent back to Hong Kong. On the album, Iyer and Ladd use airports as the backdrop to explore issues of foreignness, national identity, and oppression. They have worked on two other projects together: 2007's *Still Life with Commentator*, about contemporary

[245] I wrote extensively on Mahanthappa in: Arathi Govind, "It's not fusion: Hybridity in the music of Vijay Iyer and Rudresh Mahanthappa" (master's thesis, University of North Texas, 2012).

information overload, and 2013's *Holding it Down: the Veteran's Dream Project*, based on interviews with veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Iyer also never entirely abandoned the world of western art music after quitting the violin. Iyer has been commissioned to compose works for numerous chamber groups in the United States and Europe, and he has an ongoing collaboration with avant-garde musician Wadada Leo Smith, with whom he released an electronic album in 2016 called *A Cosmic Rhythm with Each Stroke*. Along with drummer Tyshawn Sorey, Iyer has served as an artistic director of the Banff International Workshop in Jazz and Creative Music since 2012. In 2017, he was the first (primarily) jazz musician to serve as music director for the famed Ojai Music Festival. Between touring, residencies in jazz venues in major cities throughout the United States and Europe, putting together festivals, and serving as a Professor of Music at Harvard, to say Iyer is successful and busy is an understatement. With this success, however, also comes some questions about how and why Iyer has become so institutionally connected. In the next section, I explore how Iyer's complex relationship with Whiteness, as both an individual and as a member of the South Asian American community, has impacted his access to predominantly White institutionalized spaces.

Backlash, Racial Hierarchies, and Whiteness

Along with all of the acclaim for Iyer has come some backlash, particularly from White critics and musicians. In a 2014 speech at Yale for Asian American alumni that was later published by the Asian American Writers' Workshop, Iyer wrote that he has seen his work "described repeatedly (mostly by white men, who tend to do most of the talking in jazz) as 'mathematical,' 'technical,' 'inauthentic,' 'too conceptual,' 'jazz for nerds,' 'dissonant,' 'academic.'" For Iyer, predominantly White critics' habit of labeling his music as heady, cerebral, and inauthentic unconsciously but clearly contributes to harmful narratives about Asian American artists. In fact, these narratives preserve the model minority stereotype, wherein Asian Americans are highly intellectual, but unable to produce good art because art is seen as primarily emotional work. In their book *Asian Americans and the Media*, Kent Ono and Vincent Pham write about the typecasting of Asian American actors in television and movies, noting that they are most frequently cast as doctors who lack emotional intelligence, coming across instead as "robotic, uncaring, and asocial."[246] Ono and Pham note that, particularly in the early twentieth century, South Asians are most likely to be cast as doctors on television, while also frequently being cast as terrorists, cab drivers, and convenience store owners.[247] In her 2004 book, *America's Asia*, English professor Colleen Lye argues that the ideas of the model minority and yellow peril are not actually opposed concepts, but continuations of each other,[248] that propagate the idea that Asian Americans, although smart and economically successful, lack the ability to

[246] Kent Ono and Vincent Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009).
[247] Bhoomi K. Thakore, "Must-See TV: South Asian Characterizations in American Popular Media," *Sociology Compass* 8, no. 2 (2014): 149-56.
[248] Colleen Lye, *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

assimilate fully into White or Black American cultures because they are too mechanical. Iyer argues something similar, stating that:

> Over the years a racialized component emerges in [critics'] language—basically a kind of model minority discourse that presumes that Asians have no soul and have no business trying to be artists, especially in proximity to Blackness, which is, in the white imagination, a realm of pure intuition, apparently devoid of intellect. No such critique, I should add, is typically leveled at white jazz musicians, of which there are many.[249]

In my own interviews with Iyer, he has frequently expressed similar views. Iyer is relatively uninterested in singling out individuals who have described his music this way because it is such a widespread pattern. In one conversation in 2016 about backlash he received after winning the MacArthur, he told me that the backlash was really "about White fragility. It's about White possession. I mean all of those people are White and male…. They said things to me that they wouldn't say to a Black person … [and] basically the reason that they said all of that is because they've never listened to me."[250] Both the Yale speech and his conversation with me revealed that what Iyer is most frustrated with is White critics continually reinforcing ideas about Black and Asian musicians: Black musicians being intuitive implies that they lack the ability to think, that they are freer, and by extension, more authentic in their writing. By contrast, Asian improvisers think too much, work too hard, and their music lacks unbridled artistry. A review of his 2016 album with African American trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith, by White critic Karl Ackerman, aptly demonstrates this dynamic. Smith's playing is described as "expressive" and "soaring and diving."[251] According to Ackerman, Smith successfully pushes Iyer to be freer on this album, a contrast to Iyer's "often methodological improvisation skills."[252]

It is true that his music is frequently described as mathematical or calculated. For example, this is a common thread in reviews of his trio's 2015 album, *Break Stuff*. John Fordham's review in *The Guardian* describes the album as having "African, Indian, and maths-inspired rhythmic ideas."[253] John Kelman's review for *All About Jazz* contrasts artist Keith Jarrett's "blank slate" method of composing to Iyer's method of spending "considerable time formulating [his] approach, and coming up with a philosophy, an aesthetic, to apply to the music they make."[254] Although on the surface this may seem like a compliment, Iyer points out in his Yale speech that it simultaneously denigrates the intellectual work of other artists (most often Black artists) and reinforces Asian American stereotypes of over-intellectualism.

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[249] Iyer, "Our Complicity with Excess."
[250] Vijay Iyer, interview by author, New York, NY, September 6, 2016.
[251] Karl Ackermann, "Vijay Iyer & Wadada Leo Smith: A Cosmic Rhythm with Each Stroke," *All About Jazz*, pub. March 9, 2016, https://www.allaboutjazz.com/a-cosmic--rhythm -with-each-stroke-vijay-iyer-and-wadada-leo-smith-ecm-records-review-by-karl-ackermann.php.
[252] Ibid.
[253] John Fordham, "Vijay Iyer Trio: Break Stuff Review – a Dizzying Pinnacle of Contemporary Jazz Multitasking," *The Guardian*, pub. January 29, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jan/29/vijay-iyer-trio-break-stuff-review.
[254] John Kelman, "Vijay Iyer Trio: Break Stuff," *All About Jazz*, pub. February 15, 2015, https://www.allaboutjazz.com/vijay-iyer-trio-break-stuff-by-john-kelman.php.

Race may be unconsciously at play in the wording used in these reviews, but it should be acknowledged that the societal understandings of jazz have changed significantly over the last century. Although mainstream White Americans associated early jazz "with disreputable performance contexts and social behaviors"[255] associated primarily with Black people, its movement to large concert halls by the 1930s and 1940s soon relegated it to "serious" music.[256] Moreover, the institutionalization of jazz in higher education (and even high school) by the late twentieth century further increased its status as elite, intellectual music.[257] There are Black musicians who are considered jazz intellectuals, such as Henry Threadgill, George Lewis, and Anthony Braxton (all of whom are also part of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, or the AACM, which Iyer greatly admires).[258] Even Steve Coleman, Iyer's mentor, has been described as "one of the most rigorously conceptual thinkers in improvised music" by New York Times critic Nate Chinen. At the same time, Chinen also called Coleman an "indefatigable outlier in jazz" because of the rhythmic complexity of his compositions.[259] Iyer believes race plays a part in why Coleman's intellectual approach to composition is pegged as atypical. Moreover, when critics call his own music mathematical, rather than complimenting his intellect, Iyer believes they imply his music lacks emotional depth.

At the same time, Iyer's perception that White musicians are never critiqued in a similar fashion seems to be untrue in at least one case. A White artist with whom Iyer has collaborated regularly, saxophonist Steve Lehman, is described similarly by White critic John Fordham, one of the reviewers of Iyer's *Break Stuff*. In 2011, Fordham described Lehman's music as "academically driven;"[260] and in 2014, he described him as "mathematically measured."[261] Whether or not there are other White musicians who are described as overly intellectual, however, is less important than the fact that Asian Americans deal with stereotypes about being mathematical thinkers on a regular basis. In other words, being consistently described in this

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[255] Austin B. Caswell and Christopher Smith, "Into the Ivory Tower: Vernacular Music and the American Academy," *Contemporary Music Review* 19, no. 1 (2000): 103.
[256] Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 125.
[257] See, for example, Caswell and Smith, "Into the Ivory Tower"; Justin A. Williams, "The Construction of Jazz Rap as High Art in Hip-Hop Music," *The Journal of Musicology* 27, no. 4 (2010): 435-59; and Eitan Y. Wilf, *School for Cool: The Academic Jazz Program and the Paradox of Institutionalized Creativity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014).
[258] The AACM, founded in 1965 by pianist Muhal Richard Abrams, is a nonprofit organization that supports the creation of contemporary avant-garde jazz and improvised musics. See their website at http://www.aacmchicago.org/.
[259] Nate Chinen, "Steve Coleman, a Jazz Outlier, Rides a Wave of Acclaim," *The New York Times*, pub. April 29, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/30/arts/music/steve-coleman-a-jazz-outlier-rides-a-wave-of-acclaim.html.
[260] John Fordham, "Steve Lehman Octet: Review," *The Guardian*, pub. January 26, 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/jan/26/steve-lehman-octet-review.
[261] John Fordham, "The Steve Lehman Octet: Mise en Abîme Review – Raises Bar on Early Work," *The Guardian*, pub. June 19, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/jun/19/steve-lehman-octet-mise-en-abime-review.

manner means that Iyer is constantly trying to fight preconceptions about his music before they have listened to it, simply because of his cultural background.

In short, this kind of writing strengthens unconscious racial biases. The model minority stereotype is clearly evidenced in these reviews of Iyer's work because according to model minority racial logic, Asian Americans are a non-problematic minority group with upward mobility due to their hard-working and intellectual "nature." At the same time, as Colleen Lye describes, ideas of perpetual foreignness, or yellow peril, prevail. Iyer's success since receiving the MacArthur has meant that critics focus less on his Indian heritage now, but earlier in his career, questions about his heritage were front and center in nearly every interview and review. Even now, Iyer feels that descriptions of his music as complex, mathematical, and intellectual are couched in language that points to his Indianness, as opposed to his Americanness. These commentaries have implications well beyond the music world, reinforcing the status quo of the American racial hierarchy.

The language around music reviews can be understood in terms of racial projects, defined by sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant as projects that serve as "an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics" which ultimately "connect what race means in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, based upon that meaning."[262] Racial projects can be positive or negative, depending on who wields control over the project and what it implies. In the case of Iyer and Asian American artists, the consistency of their media depictions functions as a racist racial project that ultimately upholds white supremacy by reinforcing the idea that Asian Americans are rational and inexpressive.

This is one of the major reasons Iyer began using his status to draw attention to issues of racial justice. He understands that he is in a position of privilege that not everyone, including some Black artist-intellectuals, might be afforded. About the time that he received his professorship, he felt like the United States was in "one of the worst years in American history, except the year after that was worse than that, and then … they just keep getting worse."[263] In addition to the numerous killings of Black men with few consequences for the White men who murdered them, Iyer was referring to the increasingly tenuous political landscape that resulted in the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Through all of this, Iyer began to ask himself, "What is my relationship to all of this?... I felt like the more urgent questions are about what became Black Lives Matter."[264] He began to name Black artists who influenced him more frequently in public interviews about his music, and made a more conscious effort to educate his audiences, especially predominantly White audiences, about the history of jazz. As DeVeaux[265] and

[262] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 1986), 56.
[263] Vijay Iyer, interview by author, New York, NY, June 21, 2017.
[264] Ibid.
[265] DeVeaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition."

numerous others[266] have written about in detail, jazz history reveals a cyclical story in which Black artistic forms and innovations are continuously adopted and commercialized by White artists. In fact, many subgenres of jazz, including swing, bebop, and free jazz, initially developed in part as reactions against White appropriation.[267]

Iyer admits that, given his Harvard job, he does need to temper his political commentary on his social media accounts and in his public interviews, but he is still rather open about his antagonistic attitude toward White people who, even unconsciously, uphold racist structures. Additionally, although he does work with some White musicians, most notably bassist Stephan Crump and saxophonist Steve Lehman, most of his regular collaborators are people of color. In an interview with I had with Crump, the bassist admitted that although he has no problem with decentering Whiteness in general, he has wondered what Iyer thinks of him as a White musician.[268] Crump noted that when Iyer talks about his favorite musicians, they are nearly always Black musicians. Although I did not have a chance to ask Iyer directly about this, I have no doubt about Iyer's respect for the bassist he has played with regularly for two decades, but Crump's comments do reveal a potential for racial tension in their relationship.

Although I was never given access to their rehearsals or soundchecks, after these comments I wondered what their interpersonal dynamics were like in professional settings, especially given that both of them talk about playing music together as a way of practicing empathy through listening. Iyer's academic work identifies the "primary mode of musical experience" as "one that we can call empathy" because it is "based on some kind of primordial experience of another person."[269] In this conversation, Iyer and I were talking about not only the experience of listening to music, but also the act of playing it. Playing music is an act of empathy because in responding appropriately, Iyer demonstrates his understanding of his co-creators' offerings. Iyer's studies on music and cognition reveal how this kind of empathy happens unconsciously; our brains light up in response to sound stimuli. However, these responses can be inhibited due to cultural biases like racial prejudice. He writes, "Recent studies on mirror neurons and racial identification ... actually suggest that the perception of racialized difference may inhibit or constrain empathy."[270] Thus, although cognitive responses to sound can be thought of as scientific, we know that unconscious and conscious cultural processes and practices bleed into our cognitive function. In other words, "there could be both innate and learned aspects to action understanding" because "it can be informed by both structural and superficial qualities visually [or sonically] perceived in the other."[271] Iyer goes on to talk about how the early

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[266] See, for example, Paul Austerlitz, *Jazz Consciousness: Music, Race, and Humanity* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005); and Ake, Garrett, and Goldmark, *Jazz/Not Jazz*.
[267] See Austerlitz, *Jazz Consciousness*, 2-3; and Tami Spry, "Call it Swing: A Jazz Blues Autoethnography," *Cultural Studies* 10, no. 4 (2010): 271.
[268] Stephan Crump, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, April 6, 2017.
[269] Vijay Iyer, interview by author, New York, NY, June 21, 2017.
[270] Vijay Iyer, "Improvisation, Action Understanding, and Music Cognition With and Without Bodies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies, Volume 1*, ed. George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 81.
[271] Ibid.

recording industry is largely responsible for the commodification of racialized sound, or as Roberts calls it, sono-racialization.[272] Thus, when musicians see and/or hear each other, how they perceive musical offerings is already colored by their cultural baggage, and their understandings of race.

The point is that Iyer views making music as a process that involves acting upon empathy, itself stimulated by conscious and unconscious cultural processes mediated through biological cognitive functions. Sometimes having empathy requires a person to inhibit their unconscious biases, or to engage in empathy more consciously. Crump has spoken to me about musical collaboration in a similar manner. In our conversation, he told me, "When I make a note or a musical gesture, it's first and foremost a physical creation in space and time that is interacting with my body, your body, and the other waves…. It's important to come up with something [to offer] that has focus on giving it maximum integrity."[273] Crump went on to clarify that by maximum integrity, he meant that his job as a musician is not to imitate or mimic any musical gestures that have been offered, but rather to react honestly and from his own point of view. Both Iyer and Crump talk about collaborating musically as both a scientific (and unconscious) process and a conscious reaction or offering. At least for Iyer, these collaborations are successful when an artist is capable of demonstrating empathy for their co-creators. I asked him what he considers to be "bad music," and he replied, "I think the music that's hardest to listen to is music where the participants are failing to listen to each other … you can hear the sound is just directed outward … and so there's not a lot of interacting happening."[274] In other words, the ability to listen and respond accordingly is paramount to making compelling music. In his view, listening and empathy are directly connected in music because in order for something to be considered musical by the listener or musical collaborator, recognition of humanity must be present, especially on the receiving end: "Notions of music are bound up with notions of personhood, of being a person, of being viewed as a person."[275] If the receiver fails to hear something as music that is being offered as such, they are actually denying that person's humanity because they fail to consider it from another person's point of view.

Understanding the connection between listening and empathy creates the possibility for an engagement with interracial politics and social justice advocacy. Iyer gained a historically grounded understanding of jazz and Blackness by reading and listening to Black authors and artists who communicated their stories to him in books, articles, rehearsals, and recordings. The more Iyer has learned about oppression in Black American communities, the more motivated he has become to attempt to dismantle racist structures that perpetuate this subjugation. He is rightly concerned about the continual denial of the humanity of Black people, especially since he is so readily associated with musical traditions that emerged from Black culture. In the process of attempting to undo or draw attention to this racial violence, however, a clear antagonism toward Whiteness emerges that sometimes makes his most regular White collaborator feel uncertain

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[272] Tamara Roberts, *Resounding Afro Asia: Interracial Music and the Politics of Collaboration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[273] Stephan Crump, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, April 6, 2017.
[274] Vijay Iyer, interview by author, New York, NY, June 21, 2017.
[275] Krishna Lewis, "'Spellbound and Sacrasanct': Vijay Iyer and Community in Real Time," *Transition* 115 (2014): 135.

about his positionality. Although I never asked Iyer directly about this, our personal conversations about Whiteness leads me to believe that Iyer is not terribly concerned about making White people feel comfortable, whether they are collaborators, critics, or consumers.

This strategy is one that social justice scholars have discussed since at least the beginning of this century. For example, White scholar Robin DiAngelo discusses comfort in terms of white fragility, a phrase she first coined in the early 2000s. White fragility, she writes, "is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves" such as "the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation."[276] Triggering situations can include anything from a person of color refusing to answer a White person's question about their racialized experiences, a White person refusing to acknowledge the existence of white privilege, or a White person becoming defensive when confronted with their racial bias.[277] One of DiAngelo's points is that many White-identified people[278] do not need to think about race or racist structures unless they are confronted with them directly, and this allows them to stay in a state of relative comfort. This kind of comfort is one that people of color rarely have, as their experiences in the world are frequently characterized by their appearance as non-White. A common example of this is when people of color end up in spaces in which they are the only person of color. In this kind of a situation, people of color may find themselves feeling out of place or unwelcomed, while many White people may not even notice the racial makeup of the people around them.[279] White-identified people who refuse to acknowledge Whiteness as a factor in their experience of the world uphold a racial hierarchy in which they remain at the top.[280] Like many other people of color, Iyer focuses on demonstrating respect and empathy for those who typically lack power in the music industry, which is largely run by elite White executives, critics, and audience members. In fact, this goal often leads Iyer to drawing attention to truths that purposefully make these stakeholders uncomfortable. In the next sections, I explore three recent projects in which he has done just that.

The Die-In

From December 18-20, 2014, Vijay Iyer performed with different groups for three consecutive nights at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) as part of the venue's 2014 Next Wave Festival.[281] Since 1983, the festival has served as a ground where artists collaborate and

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[276] Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 57.
[277] Ibid., 57-58.
[278] I use "White-identified" for a number of reasons here. First, to acknowledge that whether or not someone appears White largely informs their experience of Whiteness, even if they are mixed-race. Also, certain groups such as light-skinned Jewish people have complex relationships with the category of Whiteness, since Jewish-ness has been racialized as non-Whiteness.
[279] I do not wish to suggest that only people of color notice when this occurs, when in fact I know many White people who do, but simply that it can be more acutely uncomfortable for people who are in the minority.
[280] DiAngelo, "White Fragility," 57-58.
[281] https://www.bam.org/programs/next-wave-festival

present new cross-disciplinary works. Each of the three nights was to feature a different work of his: the first night he would perform a solo piece commissioned by BAM; the second, he would play a piece for piano, electronics, and string quartet; and the final night would feature live accompaniment to a screening of the Prashant Bhargava film *Radhe Radhe: Rites of Holi*, for which Iyer wrote the score.

Outside of the museum, a series of different events were taking place. On November 24, 2014, less than one month before the concerts, a grand jury decided not to indict a White police officer named Darren Wilson who shot and killed African American teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. A week and a half later, the NYPD officer who choked African American man Eric Garner to death, Daniel Pantaleo, was also let go after a grand jury decided not to indict. The grand jury decision in Ferguson had already sparked intense protests around the country. Garner's death, having happened in Staten Island, however, greatly intensified protests in New York. One day after the Garner decision, on December 4, protesters began gathering daily in front of police departments and government buildings. On December 13, more than 25,000 people marched through the streets of Manhattan, across the Brooklyn Bridge, and into Brooklyn to protest police brutality and to support Black Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter is a movement started in 2013 by three Black female activists named Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, after George Zimmerman's acquittal in the Trayvon Martin case.[282] As more Black people were killed without cause or justice, the Black Lives Matter movement spread throughout the country in 2013 and 2014. At the end of 2014 in New York, the enmity between the NYPD and the protestors calling for justice in the Eric Garner murder was palpable, and over three hundred protestors had been arrested.[283] Two police officers were injured during a melee on the Brooklyn Bridge, and the mainstream media and NYPD immediately labeled the six people responsible for the injuries "anarchists" in an attempt to paint them as dangerous in the eyes of the non-protesting public.[284]

It was in this context that the 2014 Next Wave Festival took place. It had been less than one week since the Brooklyn Bridge incident, and police were still trying to identify five out of the six people they believed were responsible for the police officers' injuries. A little over a year before, George Zimmerman had been acquitted in the death of Trayvon Martin. The addition of the two additional grand jury decisions on Brown and Garner's deaths pushed hundreds of thousands of Americans over the edge. People all over the country were either taking the side of law enforcement or the side of Black victims.

The Zimmerman acquittal had been a huge turning point for Iyer, so these new decisions intensified his desire to address Black oppression more explicitly in his own work. Iyer told me

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[282] Valentina Zarya, "Founders of #BlackLivesMatter: Getting Credit for Your Work Matters," *Fortune*, pub. July 19, 2015, https://fortune.com/2015/07/19/blacklivesmatter-work-credit/.
[283] David J. Goodman, "Police Hunt for 6 in Brooklyn Bridge Protest," *The New York Times*, pub. December 15, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/16/nyregion/police-hunt-for-6-in-brooklyn-bridge-protest-melee.html.
[284] Jamie Schram, Kirstan Conley, and Danika Fears, "Police ID First 'Alleged' Cop-Basher as Tips Pour In," *The New York Post*, pub. December 18, 2014, https://nypost.com/2014/12/18/public-helping-cops-track-down-protesters-in-nypd-attack/.

in 2016 that he had the sense at BAM, where the audience was made up of predominantly middle and upper class White middle-aged New Yorkers, that they were relatively removed or unaware of what was happening outside. He told me that BAM "fashions itself as a safe space for wealthy White patrons. Its denizens are actually Manhattanites and rich White Brooklynites … I basically wanted to ambush the venue and the audience with this other thing."[285] That other thing was a die-in. A die-in is a direct action in which protestors mimic dead bodies by lying on the ground. Die-ins are often used by animal rights activists and anti-war protestors to draw attention to destruction and death caused by the meat industry and war, respectively, but they have also been used in Black Lives Matter protests.[286] Iyer wanted to force the White audience at BAM to reckon with the deaths of unarmed Black men at the hands of mostly White men. A die-in seemed like the perfect way to disrupt a space that to him, felt sterile and conveniently disengaged from what was happening on the streets outside of BAM. So, on the first night of his three-night engagement, Iyer began his solo concert set with a die-in.

I should clarify that I was not present for this show. I learned about it in a 2016 conversation with Iyer. The following reconstruction of events is based on Iyer's description, and a *New York Times* review written by journalist Jon Pareles.[287] At this first show, a solo piano concert, Iyer was set to premiere a new piece commissioned by BAM. He had struggled with the decision of whether or not to cancel the shows given the political circumstances, but instead he decided to use it as an opportunity to subvert concertgoers' expectations. He asked for help from New York-based choreographer Paloma McGregor, creator of Dancing While Black, an "artist-led initiative that supports the diverse work of Black dance artists by cultivating platforms for process, performance, dialogue and documentation,"[288] to stage the die-in. McGregor quickly put together a group of dancers for the event. At first, Iyer wanted to be off stage for the performance because he was concerned that his presence might distract viewers away from the mostly Black performers, but McGregor and the dancers insisted that he participate in the production in a show of solidarity.

As the audience entered, the piano stood alone on the stage, according to Pareles. The stage lights were turned down as the performance began, and when they were turned back up, several dancers lay still around the stage, with Iyer clad in a black suit lying down in the center. The screen at the back of the stage projected, at first, a quote from Frantz Fanon's *A Dying Colonialism*:

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[285] Vijay Iyer, interview by author, New York, NY, September 6, 2016.
[286] See Marcia Chatelain and Kaavya Asoka, "Women and Black Lives Matter," *Dissent* 62, no. 3 (2015): 54-61; and Catherine L. Langford and Montené Speight, "#BlackLivesMatter: Epistemic Positioning, Challenges, and Possibilities," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 5 (2015), accessed July 19, 2019, http://contemporaryrhetoric.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Langford_Speight_11_4.pdf.
[287] Jon Pareles, "Conscience of a Composer: Vijay Iyer Performs at BAM Harvey Theater," *The New York Times*, pub. December 19, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/20/arts/vijay-iyer-performs-at-bam-harvey-theater.html.
[288] See http://angelaspulse.org/project/dancing-while-black/ for more information.

> There is not occupation of territory, on the one hand, and independence of a persons on the other. It is the country as a whole, its history, its daily pulsation that are contested, disfigured, in the hope of a final destruction. Under these conditions, the individual's breathing is an observed, an occupied breathing. It is a combat breathing.[289]

The choice to use Fanon in the die-in is telling. In the video of Eric Garner's death at the hands of the NYPD, Garner can be heard saying, "I can't breathe" no fewer than eleven times. Fanon's work in postcolonial theory has influenced liberation movements around the world, including the Black Power Movement in the United States. This particular passage reflects one of Fanon's most salient points: that colonialism's societal and psychological legacy remains long after its supposed end. Garner's final words, and his death at the hands of White authorities, are a haunting reminder of this same point.

As the dancers lay still, Iyer slowly crawled toward the piano and made his way to the bench. He began improvising what Pareles describes as "low, almost furtive rumbles and clusters." The dancers then began to rise gradually, performing "stylized gestures" imitating police choking and murdering Black men.[290] The screen at the back of the stage then projected the words "Black Lives Matter."[291]

When I asked Iyer about his intention in doing the die-in, he told me that he had learned from UCLA Professor of History Robin Kelley that a die-in "gets in the way of normal functioning of society."[292] In the space of BAM, this meant forcing the audience to unexpectedly witness a political action. Iyer did not know how the audience received the die-in, but I found a blog post on the BAM website with a few comments from attendees that night. One person, who called themselves "RC" in the comments, wrote: "Vijay Iyer's appreciation of life in all cultures was clear in tonight's BAM concert…. The first piece, with its powerful visual and musical testimony – hands up don't shoot, hands together in in [sic] supplication, and the video statement 'Black lives matter,' was powerful."[293] Another anonymous commenter wrote, "The opening piece, a response to racial injustice and recent incidents here in NYC and around the country … was a magnificent and moving example of art responding to social issues." Judging from these few comments and the New York Times review, the political context of that moment was not lost on audience members.

However, these comments also seem to reveal that although they registered the action as political, it still felt like part of a seamless performance. This difference – between a political action and a political performance – is significant because the function of these events and processing by the observers change. Attending a performance is something to which people consent; on the other hand, a political action can happen anywhere, disrupting the flow of daily life. Part of the reason the audience perceived the die-in as a performance is that it led directly

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[289] Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove/Atlantic, 1994), 65.
[290] Pareles, "Conscience of a Composer."
[291] Ibid.
[292] Vijay Iyer, interview by author, New York, NY, September 6, 2016.
[293] BAM Blog, "In Context: Vijay Iyer: Music of Transformation," *BAM.org*, posted December 11, 2014, http://blog.bam.org/2014/12/in-context-vijay-iyer-music-of.html.

into a performance, so the audience's expectations, perhaps, were not disrupted as much as Iyer and the dancers would have wished. At the same time, switching from his role in the political action to performance mode was a difficult transition that Iyer found "jarring" and challenging.[294] Upon further reflection, he told me, "It probably could have been more disruptive, but what I wanted was for at least a moment, somebody in the room would feel like the show is not going to happen."[295] Of course, the show did happen, largely because Iyer wanted to fulfill his professional obligations; after all, BAM was paying him for his commission. We do know that the die-in stuck with at least some of the audience members long enough for them to write about it on internet forums, and to some degree, they understood it as connected to the events that were happening to people of color in the United States more broadly. Whether or not his message was effective, however, Iyer used his platform in a largely White space to reorient the audience's attention toward Blackness, at least temporarily.

Suite for Trayvon (and Thousands More)

Toward the latter half of the summer of 2013, soon after George Zimmerman's acquittal, Iyer was preparing to record with Trio 3, a group featuring Oliver Lake (saxophone), Reggie Workman (bass), and Andrew Cyrille (drums). The musicians that make up Trio 3 have worked professionally for more than three decades longer than Iyer, each individual having an impressive resume that include playing with jazz legends like Art Blakey and John Coltrane (Workman), Anthony Braxton and Wadada Leo Smith (Lake), and Cecil Taylor (Cyrille). Iyer followed the work of the trio for years, and when they asked him to join them in the studio, he began working on new compositions for their quartet. One of these compositions became *Suite for Trayvon (And Thousands More)*. The album, *Wiring*, was recorded in August 2013 and released in April 2014.

The suite consists of three movements, lasting just under eighteen minutes on the recorded version. The first movement, entitled "Slimm" after Trayvon Martin's nickname, begins with the bass and the left hand of the piano playing a three-measure ostinato in 9/8, with two measures of 2+2+2+3 followed by one measure of 3+3+3, depicted below:[296]

Figure 4.1 Bassline of "Slimm" from Suite for Trayvon Martin (And Thousands More) *composed by Vijay Iyer.*

[294] Vijay Iyer, interview by author, New York, NY, September 6, 2016.
[295] Ibid.
[296] Transcription by author.

Drummer Cyrille plays a steady sixteenth note pattern on the ride cymbal that mirrors the three-measure pattern with appropriated placed accents at the beginning of each large beat. After two cycles of this pattern, Iyer and alto saxophonist Lake begin playing a rhythmically and melodically complex head in unison that lasts about eighteen measures, or the duration of nearly six complete cycles of the bass ostinato. Lake solos for a little over one minute while Iyer comps on the piano, finally repeating the head one more time. Suddenly, three minutes into the piece, the ostinato breaks down and the quartet begins improvising freely over a repeating descending scale (G-F-E-D-Db-C) that Lake and Iyer repeat. They slow down gradually before finally ending, with Lake's high G the most prominent note to linger.

It is easy to imagine a narrative for this movement, in which the ostinato section represents Martin walking down the street in Sanford, Florida. Although the steady bassline sounds somewhat ominous, perhaps alluding to the danger to come, the saxophone and right-hand piano melody is playful and light. The breakdown of the ostinato results in a more chaotic, less grounded feel, possibly representing Martin's encounter with Zimmerman that resulted in being shot. The movement slows gradually, perhaps representing Martin's belabored breathing, until the piece concludes and Martin is no more.

The second movement, "Fallacies" refers to untruths and injustices in how murdered Black men are treated by society, media, law enforcement, and the justice system.[297] This movement, in a slow 4/4, is more deliberate and heavy-handed. The form of the piece is similar, opening with Iyer and Workman playing a three-measure ostinato on bass and the left hand of the piano, notated below[298] (with the slightly different first measure included).

Figure 4.2 Bass and piano ostinato for movement two, "Fallacies."

Again, Iyer and Lake play a head, followed by solos on saxophone and piano, and the repeated head. Halfway through the piece, the band drops out and Cyrille plays a short drum solo, then he launches into a much faster steady 4/4. A new, frantic melody enters, reminiscent of hard bop. They begin freely improvising again for the final two minutes of the piece, this time ending with Workman. These final bass notes lead smoothly into the third movement. The second movement

[297] See, for example, Shaun L. Gabbidon, George E. Higgins, and Hillary Potter, "Race, Gender, and the Perception of Recently Experiencing Unfair Treatment by the Police: Exploratory Results from an All-Black Sample," *Criminal Justice Review* 36, no. 1 (2011): 5-21; and Kelly Welch, "Black Criminal Stereotypes and Racial Profiling," *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 23, no. 3 (2007): 276-88.
[298] Transcription by author.

feels overall less programmatic than the first, but the insistent and disjointed ostinato has a steadfast and incensed sound.

The final movement in *Suite for Trayvon*, "Adagio," begins with a short tremolo solo by Workman. The piece is an elegy, and the influence of John Coltrane's "Alabama," a piece composed in memory of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing that killed four Black girls in 1963, is undeniable. Similar to Coltrane's composition, "Adagio" begins with Iyer playing low, soft clusters on the piano. Workman begins to bow the bass, emphasizing harmonics. Lake finally enters with a slow melody consisting of long, held notes. Cyrille's drumming is subtle and improvisatory here; he plays the tom-toms with soft mallets. Iyer makes his way up the piano slowly throughout the four-minute piece. The suite ends quietly, with Iyer's final high-pitched chord resonating for several seconds until it is inaudible. It feels improvised, contemplative, and doleful.

Writer and activist Amiri Baraka wrote the liner notes for the album *Wiring* just two months before his death. About Iyer's suite, he wrote: "It is a moving example of what artists who want their works to spring from the whole of society's life [*sic*], not just the inside of their heads. So that finally they are emblazoned in all of us."[299] By this, Baraka seems to imply that, unlike some artists, Iyer does not isolate himself while composing, but rather, that his compositional practice consciously emerges from a larger social context. A longtime fan of Iyer, Baraka even published a review of Iyer's 2005 album, *Memorophilia*, in his book *Digging: The Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music*.[300] Iyer considered Baraka both a friend and a mentor, someone from whom he had learned about the significance and importance of recognizing Black accomplishments. For both Iyer and Baraka, *Suite for Trayvon (And Thousands More)* is about using an art form that arose out of predominantly Black communities to recognize the violence that is still perpetrated against this community. Appropriately, the composition uses stylistic elements from late-1950s to mid-1960s jazz, with hard bop and early free jazz influences throughout. I submit that Iyer draws upon these influences thoughtfully in order to consciously engage in a show of solidarity and demonstrate his knowledge and understanding of African American history. Thus, it is no coincidence that these influences hail from the same time that the Civil Rights Era coalesced into a movement.

It is possible that Iyer would critique my interpretation and description of this piece. In particular, I suspect that he might disagree with the programmatic narrative I have constructed in the first movement, because while people, events, and memories often influence his music, he often recoils at the thought of his music having prescriptive meaning. One afternoon in January of 2017, we discussed the idea of trying to understand music. He told me that the idea that music is understandable is

> bound up with a certain value system that has to do with the West and a value system around composition…. I guess embedded in that question is some kind of discovery

[299] Imamu Amiri Baraka, "Liner Notes to *Wiring*," Trio 3, *Wiring*, Intakt Records 233, 2014, compact disc.
[300] Imamu Amiri Baraka, *Digging: The Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music*, Vol. 13 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

> narrative about music…. I find myself trying to unpack or resist or at least deconstruct that need that we think we have to understand music.[301]

Iyer does not deny that music can be referential, but he does not believe that it conveys meaning that is as tangible or easily understandable as written or spoken languages. Much of this mirrors his thoughts on how we process music cognitively: when we hear music, our brains light up in ways that register the sounds as music only if we have empathy for the people making the music.[302] If we are unable to recognize the humanity of the individuals making the music, we are less likely to process it as music. [303] In written and spoken languages, even if we do not understand the language at hand, thoughts can be translated in a way that becomes understandable (even if the translation is loose). No equivalent kind of translation exists in music, making it a much more opaque form of communication. Instead, musicologists and music cognition experts Marc Leman and Pieter-Jan Maes write that music cognition studies suggest that humans perceive music largely by anticipating patterns that are understood based upon previous exposure and knowledge.[304] By constructing a narrative out of Iyer's suite, I am attempting to translate something abstract and opaque into something concrete, when in reality, no matter how concrete the influences are behind the music, the sounds remain abstract, and their meaning obscured. Although each movement in *Suite for Trayvon (And Thousands More)* draws upon specific references that make it tempting to construct these narratives, to better understand Iyer, I need to be self-critical of any prescribed meaning that I attach to his music.

SF Jazz

For the 2017-2018 season, Vijay Iyer was named a Resident Artistic Director at the SFJazz Center. Located in one of the most densely populated and expensive neighborhoods in San Francisco, SFJazz is a music venue in Hayes Valley that opened in 2013.[305] It is a short walk away from Davies Symphony Hall and the San Francisco War Memorial Opera House, and patrons of these institutions frequently shop and dine beforehand at the dozens of trendy restaurants and boutiques that line the nearby streets. Tall glass walls and doors surround the SFJazz lobby and the attached bar and restaurant. While the smaller Joe Henderson Lab has a capacity of 100, the main performance stage, Miner Auditorium, can seat up to 700 patrons. Tickets are expensive: tiered based upon location in the auditorium and priced based upon popularity of the performing artist. Balcony seats in Miner can cost over $50 per person, with orchestra seating frequently priced between $80 and 100. Unsurprisingly, the venue has become a haven for older wealthy, White patrons from around the Bay Area, akin to BAM in Brooklyn.

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[301] Vijay Iyer, interview by author, New York, NY, June 21, 2017.
[302] Iyer, "Improvisation, Action Understanding, and Music Cognition," 74-90.
[303] See, for example, Eric Clarke, Tia DeNora, and Jonna Vuoskoski, "Music, Empathy and Cultural Understanding," *Physics of Life Reviews* 15 (2015): 61-88.
[304] Marc Leman and Pieter-Jan Maes, "Music Perception and Embodied Music Cognition," in *The Routledge Handbook of Embodied Cognition*, ed. Lawrence Shapiro (London: Routledge, 2014), 81-82.
[305] Crystal Chen, "Mapping San Francisco Neighborhood Rent Prices (Summer 2018)," *Zumper*, last updated June 20, 2018, https://www.zumper.com/blog/2018/06/mapping-san-francisco-neighborhood-rent-prices-summer-2018/.

Iyer curated two concert series at SFJazz, the first of which ran February 9-12, 2017, and the second of which ran January 18-21, 2018. Each night of the series featured a different set of artists with whom Iyer has collaborated with over the years. All in all, Iyer played with over twenty different people over the course of the eight nights, with a few of his collaborators playing on multiple nights in different combinations. I attended both series, but in this section I will concentrate on the 2017 shows.

The concert on February 9, 2017 was billed as "An Evening of Duets," with Iyer playing two sets with different duet partners. I found my way to my seat in the mezzanine to the left of the stage and noticed a postcard placed on my seat. I looked around and noticed that every seat had a postcard on it. I immediately picked mine up and examined it. On the front side was a black-and-white, upside-down depiction of an American flag, pictured below. Underneath the stripes were the words "White Supremacy," crossed out. On the back of the postcard, the final two lines of the United States National Anthem, "The land of the free / and the home of the brave," were written, with enough words crossed out to make the card simply read "The Home of the Brave."

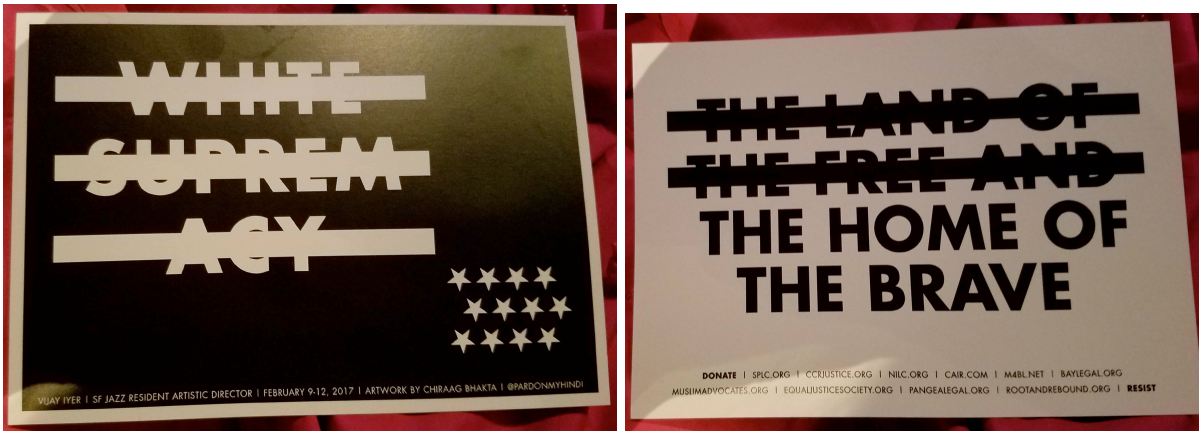

Figure 4.3 Postcard from Night 1 of Iyer's 2017 residency at SFJazz, created by Chiraag Bhakta.

I noticed from looking at the postcards on the seats on either side of me that there was another version of the postcard, which featured a quote by Indian novelist and activist Arundhati Roy: "From now on it is not dying we must fear, but living." On the backside was a graphic print of an Indian woman, eyes closed. The small print at the bottom of the postcards read "Vijay Iyer | SF Jazz Resident Artistic Director | February 9-12, 2017 | Artwork by Chiraag Bhakta | @PardonMyHindi."

Chiraag Bhakta is the Indian American artist who designed DJ Rekha's Basement Bhangra logo and many Basement Bhangra promotional materials – including the "Bhangra Against Bush" poster featured in Chapter 2 – during the party's first decade. Bhakta is close friends with both Iyer and Malhotra, and although he and Iyer had never collaborated before the SFJazz residency, I was not surprised to see that Bhakta was commissioned for this occasion since he lives in San Francisco. I had met Bhakta a few months prior at an event for the South

Asian American Digital Archives (SAADA) in Philadelphia, where he was presenting new artwork inspired by material found in the archive. Bhakta's best-known artwork, a critique of the appropriation and commercialization of yoga called #whitepeopledoingyoga, was exhibited for two months in the SF Asian Art Museum in 2014. His work often explores South Asian and South Asian American topics and politics.

I carefully observed how audience members at this first concert reacted to Bhakta's postcards as they arrived. Most audience members, who were predominantly White and middle-aged, studied them for a brief moment, but very few of them seemed to show any sustained interest. After a brief introduction by an SF Jazz staff member, Iyer entered the stage and picked up the microphone. "The beautiful postcards that were on your chair as you entered are not trash," he stated. "They are pieces of art created by my friend and artist, Chiraag Bhakta." He went on to explain that Bhakta's artwork would also be projected onto the screen behind the stage throughout the four night performance, and that Iyer had commissioned him to collaborate for these shows relatively last minute.

Less than three weeks before the residency, Donald Trump was inaugurated as the 45th president of the United States. A week later, on January 27, 2017, he had instituted Executive Order 13769, also known as the "Muslim ban" or "travel ban," which restricted anyone from seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the US, under the guise of homeland security. The order sparked outrage and embarrassment among numerous US citizens and residents. More than 700 travelers were detained during the ninety-day period that the order was in place, resulting in mass protests at airports throughout the country, with protestors holding signs in support of immigrants and detainees.[306] I took the photo seen on the next page at John F. Kennedy Airport in New York City on January 29, where I participated in travel ban protests. The majority of the protestors at JFK were from AMEMSA (Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and South Asian) communities, as anger and fear were especially acute in these communities who felt specifically targeted. These feelings turned out to be justified, as hate crimes perpetrated against individuals in these communities rose by fifteen perfect throughout 2017.[307] Having already experienced spikes in anti-Muslim, anti-Middle Eastern, and anti-South Asian sentiment after 9/11, these communities began reforming and strengthening coalitions with each other in anticipation of growing hatred in the wake of Trump's election.

[306] Steve Almasy and Darran Simon, "A Timeline of President Trump's Travel Bans," *CNN*, Last updated March 20, 2017, https://www.cnn.com/2017/02/10/us/trump-travel-ban-timeline/index.html.

[307] Scott Malone, "U.S. Anti-Muslim Hate Crimes Rose 15 Percent in 2017: Advocacy Group," *Reuters*, pub. April 23, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-islam-hatecrime/u-s-anti-muslim-hate-crimes-rose-15-percent-in-2017-advocacy-group-idUSKBN1HU240.

Figure 4.4 A protestor at JFK Airport on January 29, 2017 holds a sign that reads, "We'll Trade One Trump For All the Refugees."

Thus, it was in this context that Iyer called Bhakta and asked him to create artwork for the SF Jazz residency. Iyer later told me that he had briefly talked to Bhakta about collaborating on something months before, but he had failed to follow up for a long time. He remembered their previous conversation after the inauguration because of Trump's growing anti-immigrant rhetoric, so a couple of weeks before the concerts, Iyer called Bhakta to ask if he would be willing to put something together for the shows that spoke to the current political moment. Bhakta immediately agreed.

The first set of that first night of shows was with trumpet player and composer Wadada Leo Smith, with whom Iyer had released an album a year earlier called *A Cosmic Rhythm with Each Stroke*. The music on that album, also the music they performed that first night at SFJazz, is partially improvised and partially composed, inspired by the visual artwork of the late Indian modern artist Nasreen Mohamedi (1937-1990). The second set that night was with Iyer's close friend and longtime collaborator, saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa. Throughout both sets, Bhakta's original artwork was projected onto the screen, including the artwork on the postcards, collaged along with other images and words pointing out the hypocrisy of patriotism and xenophobia.

Night two of the residency was the west coast premiere of "Open City" and "Blind Spot," large ensemble pieces that Iyer developed along with Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole, based on two of Cole's books of the same names. Iyer played piano and a Fender Rhodes, and Cole performed spoken word from the book. The rest of the ensemble consisted of alto saxophonist Steve Lehman, mallet percussionist Patricia Brennan, Okkyung Lee on cello, Tyshawn Sorey on drums, Graham Haynes on cornet, Mark Shim on tenor saxophone, and Stephan Crump on bass. On night three, Iyer brought his classic trio with Crump on bass and Sorey on drums. For the first set, two guest artists joined the trio: Ambrose Akinmusire on trumpet and Mark Shim on saxophone. For the second set, the trio played by themselves. On the final night, Iyer brought his project Tirtha to SF Jazz. Tirtha is a trio formed in 2007 with tabla player Nitin Mitta and South Indian classical guitarist Prasanna. In 2011, they released their debut album, which consists of pieces composed either by Iyer or Prasanna that combine elements of South Indian classical (Carnatic) music with jazz.

Each night of the residency was completely different in instrumentation, sound, and performance style, representative of only a small portion of the diversity of Iyer's body of work. The concerts were well attended and happily received, with every night ending in a standing ovation. Aside from his comments at the beginning of each show that the postcards were keepsakes, Iyer did not refer to the artwork directly. Like the die-in at BAM, he let it speak for itself, clearly conveying his politics and loyalties, and letting the mostly White and wealthy audience sit with artwork that implicated the United States in upholding white supremacy. Unlike BAM, the artwork was present throughout each two-hour performance, forcing the audience to grapple with it for the duration of the shows. Although I cannot speak for all of the audience members, as a fellow second-generation South Asian American immigrant, seeing a respected musician in that space use his platform to unapologetically criticize that current political moment resonated powerfully in me. Bhakta's artwork, and Iyer's dissemination of it every night, was a clear and scathing critique of current US politics, explicitly calling out the hypocrisy of a country that claims to value freedom but restricts immigration based upon religion, and by extension, race and ethnicity.[308]

[308] Of course, San Francisco is a largely left-leaning city, and it is unlikely that there were many White audience members who did not already agree with these politics, but I believe that for Iyer and Bhakta it was important to highlight these anti-immigration policies precisely because they, as Brown men, were – and are – more likely to be targeted directly.

Conclusion

Vijay Iyer's resistance to being labeled as a jazz musician and a South Asian American artist can sometimes appear inconsistent or disingenuous. How can someone who collaborates with other South Asian artists so frequently deny being a South Asian American artist? Why does someone who refers to jazz legends as his mentors resist being called a jazz musician? Why does someone who is clearly intelligent and accomplished resist being labeled so?

Iyer is not unaware of his position of privilege as a Harvard professor and a critically acclaimed jazz pianist and composer; one who has been invited to perform in and curate some of the most prestigious festivals in the world. To that end, he has worked to bring in more faculty of color to the Harvard Department of Music, successfully lobbying for a professorship for bassist and singer Esperanza Spalding. He is simultaneously aware that a large part of his privilege is the result of white academia and the white music industry's comfort with his Asianness. Asians have often been stereotyped to be passive about racial inequities,[309] and despite scholarship on Asian American resistance movements, US history books still do not write much, if anything, about the ways that Asian Americans have resisted racist treatment.[310] In fact, this is another extension of the model minority myth, which contends that Asian Americans, in addition to being studious and upwardly mobile, are happy not to challenge the status quo.[311] In 2016, Iyer told me that "often in the concert halls of Europe and at the performing arts centers across the U.S. [the audience] tends to be older white folks with money who are there to experience difference on display."[312] But there are many types of difference that can be on display, and Iyer believes that these mostly white, wealthy patrons are only comfortable with particular kinds of difference. He went on, "I think I partly got in here as a kind of exotic other, but also as a non-Black safe choice for them." Iyer does not know what other concerts his audience members attend, so it is possible this is true, but it is important to acknowledge that his *perception* of the white audience's behavior may not reflect their *actual* behavior and beliefs. Still, as a non-Black person participating in a Black music tradition, Iyer believes that it is important to challenge his audiences to confront antiblack racism. He also asks audiences to question a surface understanding of diasporic South Asianness by performing and discussing a diverse array of musics that only sometimes relate to his South Asian heritage but nearly always relate to his

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[309] See for example, Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1991); and Jan Lin, *Reconstructing Chinatown: Ethnic Enclave, Global Change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

[310] Pei-te Lien, *The Making of Asian America through Political Participation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 40.

[311] See Qin Zhang, "Asian Americans Beyond the Model Minority Stereotype: The Nerdy and the Left Out," *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 3, no. 10 (2010): 20-37; and Hye Jin Paek and Hemant Shah, "Racial Ideology, Model Minorities, and the 'Not-So-Silent Partner': Stereotyping Asian Americans in U.S. Magazine Advertising," *Journal of Communication* 14, no. 4 (2003): 225-43.

[312] Vijay Iyer, interview by author, New York, NY, September 6, 2016.

Americanness to some degree. As a musician, he asks critics and industry executives to stop labeling him solely as the cerebral jazz musician.[313]

A few months after SF Jazz in 2017, I asked him how he would prefer his artistic practice be talked about, since he was so resistant to labels. He laughed: "I haven't found a way that I like my artistic practice to be talked about yet." He went on to clarify that he was not trying to be contrarian without reason. "I'm in a tradition of pushing against genre…. Resistance to genre is as old as genre. And it comes from resistance to power in general, resistance to labeling and categorization of human beings, and basically, these are racial categories that we're talking about."[314] It was a point I had not thought about in these terms until this moment. Jazz is a tradition that has been appropriated, reformulated, and re-appropriated throughout its history.[315] Although tension between jazz musicians of different faces has lessened over time, as Tamara Roberts points out in their book, *Resounding Afro Asia*,[316] musical sounds have racial connotations whether or not people are conscious of them. These racialized categories of music were popularized and continue to be commoditized by the recording industry.

Thus, when Iyer insists that he "is a fact," and that he aims to be "an undeniable presence" that cannot be categorized,[317] he is not claiming that he is exactly like Jimi Hendrix or Nina Simone or other Black artists. He is well aware of the fundamental differences in his experiences as a South Asian American man. Rather, his determination to be recognized, his resistance to labels, and his insistence on pushing his audiences to confront racism is his way of participating in a tradition that has always resisted in these ways. As DeVeaux writes, "Defining jazz is a notoriously difficult proposition" because "what jazz is *not* is far more vivid rhetorically than what it is."[318] By insisting that he is a fact, he is purposefully drawing attention to his brown body and his South Asianness, while still refusing to be labeled an Indo-jazz artist. He uses performance to take power away from the music industry executives who have successfully made people associate particular bodies with certain sounds and ideas. He is also strengthening his coalitional ties with other politically active artists in the networks in which he circulates, particularly Black musicians fighting for racial justice in the wake of police brutality, and other

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[313] See, for example, John Lewis, "Vijay Iyer Sextet Review – Pushes Jazz into the Future," *The Guardian*, pub. July 10, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/jul/10/vijay-iyer-sextet-review-jazz-cafe-london; Nate Chinen, "A Pianist's Escalating Insurgency: 'Accelerando' by Vijay Iyer Trio," *The New York Times*, pub. March 14, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/15/arts/music/accelerando-by-the-vijay-iyer-trio.html?mtrref=www.google.com; and Michael J. West, "Pianist Vijay Iyer Entertains with High-Wire Act at Strathmore," *The Washington Post*, pub. November 10, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/music/pianist-vijay-iyer-plays-stirring-music-of-transformation-concert-at-strathmore/2014/11/10/0268f6b4-668e-11e4-bb14-4cfea1e742d5_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.40d74461b01d.

[314] Vijay Iyer, interview by author, New York, NY, June 21, 2017.

[315] DeVeaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition," 525-560.

[316] Roberts, *Resounding Afro Asia*.

[317] He is not atypical in doing so, as numerous musicians often labeled jazz musicians have resisted this category, including his mentor, Steve Coleman.

[318] DeVeaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition," 528.

South Asian artists calling out racist US immigration policies. If we understand Iyer as embedded in a tradition of resistance, it becomes easy to understand how he reconciles thoughts and actions that, on the surface, might appear contradictory. He is a person whose core values demand that he respect, listen to, and pay forward the deep knowledge he has learned from within his artistic communities, to whom he owes his success.

In the final profile, I shift to the West Coast to look at the work of Rupa Marya. Like Iyer, Marya's social justice work most often involves non-South Asian communities, but her understanding of her own racial identity helps her build solidarities with other communities of color. Also like Iyer, Marya uses her platform to amplify voices with less access to privileged spaces, like elite educational institutions and concert stages. As a bandleader, physician, and organizer, Marya works in numerous different capacities, but the unifying threads between all of her work are her focus on social justice and healing.

Chapter 5: Magic Medicine: Rupa Marya's Life and Work as a Healer

Introduction

"I believe in magic," states Rupa Marya. This matter-of-fact declaration takes me by surprise since, in addition to being a professional musician, Marya is a practicing physician. Having grown up with a physician mother myself, I incorrectly presumed that no practitioner of Western medicine[319] would admit to believing in something as fantastical as magic.

Rupa and I are sitting at Guerilla Cafe in Berkeley, California in August 2016. I have just asked her how a recent recording project with indigenous women in British Columbia emerged. She explains that in 2015, she was still recovering from the birth of her first child. After dislocating her sacrum during labor, she continued to experience pain two years later. Help from numerous professionals in Western medicine yielded mixed results, so Marya finally sought treatment from an acupuncturist friend. During treatment, which permanently cured her pain, she revealed to the acupuncturist that since becoming a mother, she struggled to write songs. The acupuncturist encouraged her to start playing music again by going back to "something really basic, like drumming and chanting,"[320] and not to put too much pressure on herself to write.

One week later, Marya received an email from an indigenous filmmaker in British Columbia named Sharon Jinkerson-Brass. Jinkerson-Brass had found a recording of a song Marya had written a decade earlier called "Water," which she had never performed live because she felt that it was not quite finished. Jinkerson-Brass had somehow come across a copy of the recording, and was immediately drawn to the song. In her email, she wrote, "I believe this is a sacred song, and I want you to come to British Columbia and meet with me and a group of women and do an indigenized version of this song…[with] drumming and chanting."[321]

They spoke on the phone shortly thereafter, and Marya learned that Jinkerson-Brass is a former nurse and community health advocate for First Nations women in BC. She was in the

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[319] I use "Western medicine" throughout this chapter to describe medicine that uses the scientific method to test theories and treatments, and whose "curing is aimed exclusively at the mechanical body." From Byron J. Good, *Medicine, Rationality, and Experience: An Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 26. This has also been called a biomedical approach, which Roter presents in opposition to a biopsychosocial approach, which, in addition to bodily symptoms, considers cultural and emotional factors in medical treatment. From D. L. Roter, "The Enduring and Evolving Nature of the Patient-Physician Relationship," *Patient Education and Counseling* 39 (2000): 5-15. It can be argued that the qualifier "Western" is inaccurate given the prevalence of the biomedical approach throughout the world, but this type of medicine did emerge during, and spread largely through, European colonization. I prefer this term to its popular synonyms, "evidence-based medicine" or "science-based medicine," as these latter terms are often used to disparage other forms of medicine which have been used for thousands of years in non-European cultures to great effect.

[320] Rupa Marya, interview by author, Berkeley, CA,, August 16, 2016.

[321] Ibid.

process of making a film about how First Nations women utilize a combination of Western medical and indigenous healing practices to help them escape patriarchal violence. Marya was fascinated and inspired, as she, too, had been grappling with how to address issues of patriarchal violence within her own South Asian community circles, especially as the new mother of a half-brown son. Marya and Jinkerson-Brass both happened to be heading to London that week; Marya, to tour with her band Rupa and the April Fishes, and Jinkerson-Brass to do a pipe ceremony with her great-great-grandfather's ceremonial regalia housed in the British National Museum.

Marya continued telling me the story: "And she ended up being in London the same day as me. We met before my gig [there], which is the empire of the conquering force of both our nations, both of our places. And we were like, 'This is weird. Two 'Indian' women meeting together in London to talk about the end of patriarchal violence.'" It felt like more than a coincidence to her. A few weeks later, Marya traveled to BC to record "Water" with a group of nine indigenous women healers and water protectors. She never imagined a project like this; yet, the confluence of events, of coincidences, of *magic*, that led to rerecording the song was the coalescence of Marya's ambitions. The more I have come to know Marya, the more I have come to understand that science and magic are not so disentwined for her. Hospital internist by day and frontwoman of Rupa and the April Fishes by night, Marya's believing in magic is, for her, understanding that there are things that happen in life that cannot yet, or perhaps ever, be explained.

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In this chapter, I analyze how Marya's seemingly disparate careers as musician, physician, and activist are all extensions of her work as a healer, which is deeply informed by her belief in magic. In their book, *Magic or Medicine?*, physician Robert Buckman and writer Karl Sabbagh define magic as the "non-material, almost indefinable and perhaps subconscious element" of healing,[322] and they contend that "When human beings are ill, they require magic *and* medicine" in order to heal.[323] They go on to clarify that using magic in healing is not about touting miracle cures or belief in otherworldly dimensions. Rather, using magic in healing is about integrating a patient's thoughts, beliefs, and healing practices that are different than the healer's own thoughts, beliefs, and healing practices, and using that knowledge in order to come up with a syncretic healing plan. There is more and more evidence to suggest that health maintenance and health outcomes are better when a syncretic approach is used.[324] Marya, I argue, uses this magical approach to healing not only as a doctor, but also as a musician and activist, in order to advocate for racial equity and justice in marginalized communities in the United States, especially for Latinxs, African Americans, and Native Americans. Using contemporary organizing strategies for coalition building that involves utilizing her access to powerful institutions, along with more traditional grassroots tactics, Marya works tirelessly

[322] Robert Buckman and Karl Sabbagh, *Magic or Medicine?: An Investigation of Healing and Healers* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1993), 7.
[323] Ibid., 213.
[324] See, for example, Marc S. Micozzi, *Fundamentals of Complementary, Alternative, and Integrative Medicine*, 6th ed. (St. Louis: Elsevier, 2019), 317-18.

toward a more equitable US.

Rupa Marya is part of a larger network of anti-racist activists in the Bay Area. Her seemingly disjointed professions as a physician, musician, and activist are part and parcel of her life serving as a healer. Her goals are lofty (decolonization, demolishing structural racism, reestablishing and upholding indigenous land rights, dismantling neoliberal capitalism), and she could easily be written off as idealistic. But Marya lives the life she envisions, chipping away at roadblocks strategically along with a diverse network of like-minded activists. This chapter addresses the conditions that led to Marya's interest in and dedication to activism and interracial coalition building, including her South Asian American upbringing, San Francisco Bay Area activist culture, and the changing racialization of AMEMSA people[325] post-9/11.[326] I go on to discuss how this has manifested into a multifaceted career dedicated to healing through interracial coalition building, particularly through her efforts to address state violence against Latinx, Black, and indigenous Americans in the United States, and her work to address environmental degradation in indigenous communities.

Marya's work as a musician is inextricably linked to her personal philosophies and her work in medicine. Rupa and the April Fishes have an eclectic sound influenced by music she hears around the world, particularly in places she has traveled as a child or as an adult to practice medicine. Her lyrics and music are deeply informed by her interactions with patients and fellow activists; her writing alternates between offering biting critiques of the problems she witnesses in contemporary American society and outlining her vision of what the world should be.

This is an activist vision that Marya frequently calls "Earth care" on social media: a strategic and holistic approach to healing the earth. Earth care is a philosophy deeply informed by the indigenous healers Marya has come to know through her activism, and it centers on valuing the health of natural ecological systems over individual human interests and prioritizing sustainability and equitable resources over amassing wealth. For Marya, Earth care activism also means valuing indigenous knowledge and land rights, and grappling with the complexities of being a settler on lands that were unjustly taken. As will become clear throughout the chapter, although she is a woman of color whose ancestors were colonized, she struggles with her positionality as a settler whose father's work in the early days of Silicon Valley development contributed to the growth of economic disparities in the Bay Area. Like the other musicians in this dissertation, then, Marya continually struggles to navigate her nuanced position as both a privileged member of the elite and a marginalized minority.

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[325] I use AMEMSA here, rather than South Asian, because of the ways South Asians have been similarly racialized to non-South Asians in a post-9/11 context: most notably, to non-South Asian members of AMEMSA (Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and South Asian) groups. See Chapter 1 for a more detailed discussion of this post-9/11 context, and also Deepa Iyer's book, *We Too Sing America: South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh Immigrants Shape Our Multiracial Future* (New York, NY: New Press, 2015).

[326] Iyer, *We Too Sing America*, 15-16. I do not mean to imply that AMEMSA people were not racialized pre-9/11, but rather, I refer to how 9/11 resulted in heightened or amplified racist acts against AMEMSA groups because of perceived connections to terrorists.

This chapter is simultaneously a profile of one extraordinarily productive activist and also a reflection on larger trends in contemporary American leftist activism. Ethnic Studies scholar Laura Pulido wrote in the conclusion of her book, *Black, Brown, Yellow and Left,* that though leftist activism was prevalent during the Civil Rights Era, "[F]ew talk about revolution today," and that we need "new and different" approaches to achieving racial and economic justice.[327] While Pulido is correct that mainstream coverage of revolutionary activism slowed after the Civil Rights Era, leftist organizers maintained a steady underground presence throughout subsequent decades. For example, Kimberly Springer documents the propagation of Black feminist organizations that grew in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and continued to flourish for nearly two decades afterwards.[328] Walter J. Nicholls, Justus Uitermark, and Sander van Haperen detail how radical leftist activists formed coalitions with each other through the 1990s and early 2000s, successfully steering the national conversation around undocumented immigrants toward a more positive, pro-immigration direction.[329] Moreover, amidst rising racial and socioeconomic tension in the United States over the last decade, radical leftist activism has again received mainstream media coverage. In reality, grassroots leftist activism never stopped, and over the last decade, activists have begun implementing new strategies, such as utilizing social media as a space for exchanging ideas, building coalitions, and organizing: all to address racial and economic inequities. Marya's work, then, serves as evidence that "new and different" approaches are already well underway.

Marya uses diversification and disjointedness as strategies to fight against structural inequalities. By diversification, I mean that she forms coalitions with a variety of groups and individuals who share common values and goals; by disjointedness, I mean that the networks she works in are often connected only because of her work as an individual. Similar to Vijay Iyer (discussed in the previous chapter), she uses her privilege to draw attention to communities of color that have been historically marginalized by white society, taking advantage of her access to institutional power. For example, she is not shy about using her position as a professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) to build economic, social, and political support for her activist projects, such as obtaining university-backed funding for the Mni Wiconi Health Clinic on the Standing Rock reservation in North Dakota. All of the strategies she uses reflect her dedication to magical healing.

In and Out of Ohlone Territory

i was born in occupied ohlone territory
living in the village of yelamu
'til i got evicted
now i'm over the in the east bay

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[327] Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
[328] Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
[329] Walter J. Nicholls, Justus Uitermark, and Sander van Haperen, "The Networked Grassroots. How Radicals Outflanked Reformists in the United States' Immigrant Rights Movement," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 42, no. 6 (2016): 1036-54.

where the sun starts its day
territory of huichin is its name
territory of huichin is its name
territory of huichin is its name
for 10,000 years before the spanish came
you might know it as the san francisco bay
that's where i'm from

–Rupa and the April Fishes, "Where You From?" (2019)

Marya was born in 1975 as part of the South Asian American community that grew throughout the US after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. Her parents were *Kshatriya* (warrior caste)[330] Hindus who grew up in the Punjab and Rajasthan regions of North India. Marya's mother was a concert pianist who, instead of attending the Royal College of Music in London where she had been accepted to continue her studies, entered an arranged marriage with Marya's father and moved to the United States. He was an electrical engineer who, after obtaining a master's degree in New Mexico, moved to the Bay Area to work in the emerging technology industry of the early 1970s. It was there, in Mountain View, California, that Rupa Marya was born and primarily raised. Now known for being the center of Silicon Valley in the San Francisco Bay Area, Marya recalls the same area being covered in farmland, and the sweet scent of apricot blossoms wafting through the air during her childhood. Her father was part of the wave of workers in the tech industry that transformed the area into its current state. Marya and her family, which grew to include her younger brother, Kavi, also spent several years living in Southern France and traveling in Spain due to her father's job.

Growing up, Marya was exposed to a variety of musics. Her mother preferred to listen to Western classical music and early British rock, such as The Beatles, while her father listened primarily to Hindustani music, along with what Marya refers to as American folk music such as Hank Williams and Roger Miller.[331] Before she began elementary school, her parents would send her and her brother to India periodically to live with her grandparents for a few months at a time, and Marya recalls learning to sing *bhajans*[332] and *ghazals*[333] with her grandmother during those extended visits. Despite her mother's background in classical piano, Marya did not hear her mother play piano until she was eight years old, when her parents could finally afford to purchase a piano for their home. Hearing her mother play had a profound impact on her, and she began formally training in piano with her mother at this time.[334]

Marya excelled in the sciences and the performing arts throughout her childhood and adolescence. Her father did not support her desire to perform, however, making it clear that

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[330] Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 5.
[331] Rupa Marya, interview by author, Berkeley, CA, August 16, 2016. I also acknowledge that Williams and Miller are often connected to the American country music scene more than folk music, but I use Marya's characterization here.
[332] *Bhajans* are Hindu devotional songs.
[333] *Ghazal* is a Middle Eastern and South Asian form of poetry, frequently set to music in North India and Pakistan.
[334] Rupa Marya, interview by author, Berkeley, CA, August 16, 2016.

professionally pursuing the arts would not be considered respectable to him. According to researchers, his attitude reflects a common one among Asian American immigrant parents, who continue to exert great influence over their children's career choices in large numbers, and often encourage them to obtain degrees for high-earning careers.[335] However, among the four musicians in this study, Marya's parents were the only ones who were antagonistic toward her desire to pursue the arts. I point this out to suggest that many Asian American parents support their children's career choices regardless of status or earning potential.

After high school, Marya attended the University of California at San Diego, where, reluctant to give up her artistic pursuits entirely, she obtained a BA in theatre and a BS in molecular biology. After finishing her undergraduate degrees, she decided to attend medical school at Georgetown University. Pursuing medicine was partially to pacify her parents, but Marya also had a genuine interest in the healing sciences. During medical school, Marya refused to give up performance entirely, and she began leading a double life. Daytime was dedicated to studying and clinical rotations; unbeknownst to her med school mentors, classmates, and her family, nighttime was for playing open mic events at local coffee shops. The few friends who did know about her musical pursuits told her she would eventually have to give up one of her careers in favor of the other. Only one friend encouraged her to do both. "Why are you trying to tell yourself you can't do these things? You're obviously both of these things," the friend insisted.[336]

When her father died unexpectedly, toward the end of her medical studies, Marya was confronted abruptly with the ephemeral nature of life. His death was both devastating and enlightening. It was the first time she realized how often "fear [is] used to control peoples' decision-making. After my father died, I thought, 'I have nothing to be afraid of. Death is going to come, so I need to pursue this at the deepest level that I can.'"[337] Marya finally resolved to find a way to practice both music and medicine openly.

After graduating from medical school, Marya moved back to the Bay Area for a general residency at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). After her first year, Marya took a year off to do a fellowship at a public radio station in Maine, in order to gain more experience in recording technology. When she returned, she informed her director that she would only continue the residency if she was allowed to pursue music and medicine equally. To her surprise and delight, her director agreed, and Marya began taking months off between rotations to tour,

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[335] See OiYan Poon, "'The Land of Opportunity Doesn't Apply to Everyone': The Immigrant Experience, Race, and Asian American Career Choices," *Journal of College Student Development* 55, no. 6 (2014): 499-514; and Mei Tang, Nadya A. Fouad, and Philip L. Smith, "Asian Americans' Career Choices: A Path Model to Examine Factors Influencing Their Career Choices," *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 45, no. 1 (1999): 142-57. For literature specifically on South Asian American parents, see Gauri Bhattacharya and Susan L. Schoppelrey, "Preimmigration Beliefs of Life Success, Postimmigration Experiences, and Acculturative Stress: South Asian Immigrants in the United States," *Journal of Immigrant Health* 6, no. 2 (2004): 83-92; and Bic Ngo, "Learning from the Margins: The Education of Southeast and South Asian Americans in Context," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 9, no. 1 (2006): 51-65.
[336] Rupa Marya, interview by author, Berkeley, CA, August 16, 2016.
[337] Ibid.

record, and develop her music career, completing what was supposed to be a three-year residency over the course of five years. After finishing her residency, Marya accepted an offer to stay on as a faculty member at UCSF, where she continues to practice medicine, teach interns, and spearhead community health projects. She also writes, records, and tours with Rupa and the April Fishes, playing large festivals in Europe during the summer, and small Bay Area venues throughout the rest of the year.

Rupa and the April Fishes

for 700 years we go back to Punjab
and for centuries before that the deserts of Rajasthan
the product of thousands of years of human migration
mixing and integration
creating culture, agriculture, and innovation
we were warriors, healers, farmers, concubines, beggars and kings
we were mathematicians, musicians and everything in between

– Rupa and the April Fishes, "Where You From?"

After years of performing music solo, Marya formed Rupa and the April Fishes in 2006. The band performs original songs in French, Spanish, English, and occasionally Hindi. She chooses her bandmates both for their diverse musical competencies and their dedication to social justice causes. The current lineup of the band includes Aaron Kierbel on drums, Misha Khalikulov on cello, Matt Szemela on violin, JHNO on keyboard, Mario Alberto Silva on trumpet, and Daniel Fabricant on bass.

Rupa and the April Fishes' sound is purposefully eclectic: they combine popular and folk music genres from numerous places around the world, such as punk, reggae, hip hop, *norteño*, *ghazals*, French folk music, klezmer music, Balkan music, and more. Their music often highlights genres from cultures Marya encounters while treating patients or busking on streets around the world. The resulting sound is often difficult for popular media to categorize, a fact that delights Marya because to her it indicates that their music resists being easily racialized. Although it is true that their heterogeneous style prevents people from presuming that they are a Indian American woman-led band, I contend that Rupa and the April Fishes are still categorized as racial "others" by critics and listeners. Most often placed into the meaningless and ambiguous genre that is "world music" on music streaming platforms, Rupa and the April Fishes' diverse music reinforces the notion that genre-less music is "musics by people from western Elsewhere."[338] In other words, people still associate their sound with being foreign and exotic, which, although vague, does imply a racial component. Thus, Marya's presumption that their music resists being easily racialized or categorized is not entirely correct.

Two years after they first formed, Rupa and the April Fishes released their first album, *eXtraOrdinary rendition*, in 2008, on a small Vermont-based record label called Cumbancha. The album is a collection of thirteen original songs, mostly in French, and it received positive

[338] Timothy D. Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism: Western Music and the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 160.

critical attention and airplay from NPR, the BBC, and numerous public radio stations in the United States and Canada. As a result, the band began playing and touring in large world music festivals throughout Europe and North America. It was during one of these festivals in Canada in 2011 that Rupa and the April Fishes first shared a bill with Red Baraat, the brass band founded by Sunny Jain (the subject of Chapter 3). Marya and Jain quickly found that in addition to sharing a myriad of musical influences, they also shared a dedication to social justice advocacy. Through this connection, she also met and befriended DJ Rekha, who often features Rupa and the April Fishes songs on her weekly radio podcast.[339]

In 2009, Rupa and the April Fishes released their second album, *Este Mundo* ("This World"), which Marya largely wrote while playing concerts and giving free medical treatment to undocumented persons along the US-Mexico border in Texas. The third song on the album, "Por La Frontera" ("To The Border"), describes her feelings about people attempting to cross into the United States undocumented. Below is an excerpt of the second verse.

A lo largo de la carraterra	Along the road
Levanto voz, levanto fuego	I raise my voice, I raise hell
Me voy, me voy por la frontera	I'm going, I'm going to the border
Porque el viento me díjo vaya pa' allá	Because the wind told me to go there
A ver, a ver	Let's see, let's see
Lo que no puedo creer	What I don't want to believe
A ver, a ver	Let's see, let's see
Una amarga verdad	A bitter truth
A ver, a ver lo que no puedo creer	Let's see, let's see what I can't believe
Que una linea vale más que una vida	How a line matters more than a life
¿Como una linea vale más que una vida?	How can a line matter more than a life?

The song's lyrics[340] reflect Marya's empathy for those crossing the border and her palpable distaste for governmental policies enforcing this political boundary. She repeatedly asks, "¿Como una linea vale mas que una vida?", or "How can a line matter more than a life?" With this lyric, Marya achieves a type of "cultural recentering,"[341] because it serves as an instance of rejecting mainstream narratives that dehumanize by referring to people as illegal, instead drawing the listener's attention to the life-and-death stakes for migrants. The music is upbeat and raucous, drawing on Mexican and Mexican American musical styles like mariachi and *norteño*, fused with Balkan brass and klezmer music. Thus, Marya, an Indian American woman, sings in Spanish backed by a culturally diverse group of musicians playing music that is largely practiced by people from small and/or marginalized communities in the United States.

This type of cultural recentering is what performance studies scholar Tamara Roberts

[339] Bhangra and Beyond is a weekly music podcast curated by DJ Rekha since 2011. It can be found at: https://www.btrtoday.com/listen/bhangraandbeyond/.
[340] Translation by author.
[341] Tamara Roberts, *Resounding Afro Asia: Interracial Music and the Politics of Collaboration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 135.

refers to as "radical interracialism."[342] Roberts differentiates radical interracialism from mere liberal multiculturalism, the latter of which still emphasizes white, Western values as those of the dominant culture, to which members of other cultures are expected to conform. This history, as Roberts explains in their introductory chapter, details how multiculturalism began in the 1960s as a radical movement by people of color to gain more recognition and cultural capital in mainstream spaces, such as on television or in large concert halls.[343] Over the next two decades, however, multiculturalism was coopted by the largely white-controlled media and government and turned into a liberal political agenda that, while acknowledging the importance of multicultural representation, still expected people of color to assimilate into dominant white American culture.[344] In contrast, radical interracialism insists on "[f]oregrounding non-Western and nonwhite traditions…addres[sing] power differentials left unchanged by previous multicultural projects and produc[ing] new criterion for cultural value in U.S.-based arts spaces."[345] On *Este Mundo*, Marya's choices of language (Spanish), subject matter (the US-Mexico border), and sound all reflect this recentering of marginalized voices. At the same time, her ability to do all of this highlights her privileged position in having access to these spaces in the first place.

Marya's on-stage persona is outspoken and political, regardless of the venue. I've seen Rupa and the April Fishes perform in quiet, intimate settings like the UC Berkeley Botanical Gardens and Osmosis Day Spa in Marin, and for large, rowdy crowds at bars like the New Parish in Oakland and the Ivy Room in Albany. Although these Bay Area venues differ significantly in size and atmosphere, the audience at shows I attended between 2016 and 2017 appeared to be a majority white, middle-aged politically progressive crowd, although a larger proportion of other races and ethnicities, especially South Asians, were present at the bar shows.

Marya frequently pauses between songs to explain the political messages behind her music and lyrics or to unabashedly criticize capitalism. She also emphasizes her belief in land reparations for indigenous people and openly expresses her concerns about state violence perpetrated against people of color. At all of the shows I have attended, the crowds scream enthusiastically in seeming agreement, but Marya's personality is such that even if a significant portion of her crowd disagreed, she would be unlikely to temper her statements much on stage. Although I have not seen her perform at large festivals overseas, Marya claims that the band's reception in Europe is similarly positive, with crowds in Germany being particularly receptive to her songs about racial violence. Marya shares some similarities with the other artists in this dissertation who use performance as a mode of disseminating political ideas, but her way of doing so also underscores some key differences in approach. For example, although Iyer makes his political positions known by distributing artwork or assembling a die-in at performances, his approach is overall less overt than Marya's, as he rarely talks on stage about the meaning of these gestures. Marya, on the other hand, is far more outspoken and less calculated in her public speech and presentation than Iyer, and her lyrics are far more explicit about her political leanings, or less abstract in direct meaning, than Iyer's instrumental performances are.

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[342] Ibid., 129.
[343] Roberts, *Resounding Afro Asia*, 6.
[344] Ibid., 6-7.
[345] Ibid., 135.

Marya attempts to enact these values similarly in her choice of performance spaces: she refuses to perform in Bay Area venues that she claims are unwelcoming to or unaffordable for poor people of color. In concerts and on social media, she regularly shares her concern about how unlivable San Francisco has become over the last several years for anyone who is not white and wealthy, having been priced out of the city herself in the last decade despite having two successful careers. Marya believes this is the direct result of the tech industry encroaching upon territory that used to be affordable for artists and blue-collar workers. In fact, Marya is not terribly far off. Although there are no clear statistics on the racial demographics of the entire tech industry in the Bay Area, the Center for Investigative Reporting[346] published an analysis of the racial demographics of one-hundred and seventy-seven of the largest Bay Area tech companies in 2018, from data collected two years earlier.[347] The statistical analysis revealed that the median percentages of racial groups present in these tech companies was 0% Black, 1.3% Latino, 18.2% Asian, and 76.3% white. Between all of those groups, only Asian Americans are well-represented in terms of the demographics of the entire state of California,[348] and the tech industry overall is predominantly non-Latino white. Although Marya frequently does not acknowledge this, Indian Americans, a group of which she is a part, are one of the groups of color in the United States who generally have more economic capital than the average American. Marya does tend to focus on inequities that affect groups of which she is not a part, especially indigenous, Black, and Latinx groups. A quick review of major Bay Area newspapers reveals that Marya is not alone in her thinking; there are dozens of articles that have been published in just the last two years about anyone who is not wealthy fleeing San Francisco or the Bay Area at large – and about how many of these people are people of color.[349] To this end, Marya organizes fellow Bay Area musicians to play only in spaces that are committed to paying artists fairly and charging reasonable covers, in an attempt to convince Bay Area musicians that if they want a thriving artistic community, they must insist on fair wages.

Organizing in this manner is another form of radical interracialism, to which I suggest should also include an economic dimension, since race and economic achievement are so intertwined in the US. Many of the efforts to boycott certain venues have been met with skepticism from fellow musicians, who fear that taking a stand to be paid fairly would mean losing the ability to make a reasonable living wage when venues refuse to hire them. Marya attempts to quell these fears by stressing the power of collective action. In April 2016, she wrote,

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[346] The Center is a Bay Area-based nonprofit that conducts journalistic research on social inequities. See http://revealnews.org/about-us/.

[347] Sinduja Rangarajan, "Here's the Clearest Picture of Silicon Valley's Diversity Yet," *Reveal News*, pub. June 25, 2018, https://www.revealnews.org/article/heres-the-clearest-picture-of-silicon-valleys-diversity-yet/. The article title continues with: "It's bad. But some companies are doing less bad."

[348] Asian Americans make up nearly 15% of the entire state. See, "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts," U.S. Census Bureau, accessed July 21, 2019, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/CA,US/RHI425218.

[349] Michelle Robertson, "Artists Are Fleeing the Bay Area. Here's Where They're Going," *SFGate*, pub. December 6, 2017, https://www.sfgate.com/expensive-san-francisco/article/Artists-leaving-sf-bay-area-grass-is-greener-12382578.php.

"Collective action does not have to be silent. But I believe it has to be economic. It has to cause a pinch somewhere."[350] It may seem impossible to keep covers low while also paying artists living wages, but Marya insists that in her experience, venues with reasonable covers get more diverse crowds who are willing to spend more money at the bar. For Marya, this method has worked, and she has been able to pay her band members well. Since she has a career as a physician that supplements her income from music-making, advocating on behalf of less economically privileged artists is another one of Marya's diverse activist strategies that helps create the conditions for a healthier, more socially just future.

Figure 5.1 Rupa and the April Fishes performing at UC Berkeley's Botanical Garden, June 2017.[351]

Since 2009, Rupa and the April Fishes have released two more studio albums on their own label (*Build* in 2012, and *OVAL* in 2015). In 2014, they also released a live album on which Marya and the band recorded the song "Happy Birthday To You." In the process of working to release the album, she learned that the song was not in the public domain, and they would have

[350] Rupa Marya, "In Response to My Query," Facebook, April 27, 2016, https://www.facebook.com/rupamarya/posts/10206346389763618.
[351] Rupa Marya, "From the Redwoods up to the Lakes tonight," Facebook, June 23, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/aprilfishes/photos/a.69188062482/10154580341467483/?type=3&theater.

to pay Warner/Chappell several hundred dollars to publish their version of the song. Upon paying the fee, she realized that Warner/Chappell was charging hundreds of artists around the country to pay them royalties if they performed the song publicly or recorded it. This infuriated her, because the profits were not being disseminated to artists, but rather to corporate executives and shareholders. Rather than accepting this state of affairs, Marya decided to challenge Warner/Chappell's claims to the song in court. She gathered a group of artists who had been similarly fined, and together they filed a lawsuit against Warner/Chappell.

The plaintiffs argued that Warner/Chappell only owned the rights to one specific piano arrangement of "Happy Birthday," and not every version of the song. In 2015, a US District Judge in Los Angeles agreed with Marya and the plaintiffs, making the song part of the public domain for the first time since 1935. In 2016, the judge determined that Warner/Chappell would have to reimburse fourteen million dollars in licensing fees they had collected over the decades. Her willingness to challenge a corporation's copyright claims resulted in large payouts to over two hundred claimants. For Marya, however, the money was not the point. Like her organization of musicians to boycott certain venues, Marya's economic privilege as a physician created the conditions that made it possible for her to pursue the suit.

Marya has clarified that as an artist, she is not anti-copyright. Copyright, she explains, exists to protect the intellectual property of artists "so they can continue making a living off of their work. It's not a commodity for corporations to beat artists up with."[352] The lawsuit was about challenging capitalist structures that operate at the expense of less powerful individuals. For her, winning the suit is proof of the power of coalition building.

In April 2019, Rupa and the April Fishes released their fifth studio album. Called *Growing Upward*, the album title references not only her growing family with urban farmer husband, Benjamin Fahrer, but also her relationship with music after a three-year-long bout with writer's block following the birth of her first son in 2013 (she had a second son in August 2018). Marya began writing songs again in 2016 after reading a book on how to continue working as an artist after becoming a mother. The book, *A Question of Balance* by Judith Pierce Rosenberg, profiles twenty-five artists and mothers and how they approach doing both successfully. Marya began a routine of reading profiles and writing in her journal every morning for three months in mid-2016. At first, her sketches and notes were scattered and vague, but they soon began to coalesce into song lyrics.

In August 2017, Marya showed me the journal page from which the title track, "Growing Upward," emerged. In the center of the page was a drawing of a dandelion emerging from the ground, its massive horizontal root structure also visible below the earth and asphalt. The flower was surrounded by industrial pollution and clouds with words like capitalism, colonialism, racism, debt, classism, and patriarchy written inside of them. She explained to me that while writing the song, she was thinking about "how we've lost our capacity to hear non-human voices" because of these human-made structures. These forces, which she calls "petrochemical

[352] Cy Musiker, "'Happy Birthday' Song Has Been Set Free," *KQED*, last updated June 27, 2016, https://www.kqed.org/arts/11745186/happy-birthday-song-has-been-set-free.

goop,"[353] keep us distracted from recognizing the non-human forces that continue to interact and react to the conditions humans create, whether or not we acknowledge them. Indigenous people, according to Marya, keep trying to remind us that we are part of a life cycle that includes non-humans, but most non-indigenous people ignore them. The phrase "Somos el color de la tierra" ("We are the color of the earth") was written in large letters on the page, and also serves as the refrain of the song. Marya's proficiency and use of multiple languages, in this case English and Spanish, underscores her mission and commitment to connecting with marginalized communities in the United States and around the world. In "Growing Upward," Marya compares the brown color of soil to that of her own skin, also suggesting a desire to emphasize connections between South Asian brownness and Latinx brownness.

"Growing Upward" is as much about difference as it is about sameness. The song reflects Marya's internal anxiety with being a settler, and the sense of loss she feels at growing up so far away from her North Indian ancestors. To address this anxiety in the song, she worked with Bay Area-based *bharatnatyam*[354] dancer Jyoti Argade, who choreographed the song for Marya and also taught her *bol* recitation to go along with the movements. *Bol* are mnemonic syllables used in Indian drumming and dancing. This is a critical piece of the song for Marya because "the articulation of the syllables in the ancient *bol* in that song … reengages your own relationship to your own indigenous self."[355] In other words, by performing Indian dance gestures and drumming syllables during the song, Marya feels more connected to her ancestors and the earth.

[353] Rupa Marya, interview by author, Berkeley, CA, August 25, 2017.
[354] *Bharatnatyam* is one of several forms of Hindu classical dance, and it originated in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Although in India it continues to be practiced mostly among South Indians, it is the most popular form of classical Indian dance among South Asian Americans, even non-Hindu ones, regardless of these regional distinctions. As discussed in Chapter 1, first-generation South Asian Americans tend to form community based upon regional distinctions; these distinctions are often less important to subsequent generations of South Asian Americans like the musicians in this dissertation. See Ketu H. Katrak, "'Cultural Translation'of Bharata Natyam into 'Contemporary Indian Dance'. Second‐Generation South Asian Americans and Cultural Politics in Diasporic Locations," *South Asian Popular Culture* 2, no. 2 (2004): 79-102.
[355] Rupa Marya, interview by author, Berkeley, CA, August 25, 2017.

Figure 5.2 Rupa Marya posing with bharatnatyam hand gestures. Photo credit: Jennifer Graham.[356]

Although Marya's work has always reflected her politics to some extent, this new album more directly reflects her own positionality in relation to these politics. In a recent San Francisco Chronicle interview, she states that the birth of her children has a lot to do with the personal nature of the album because "It's not just for me anymore. It's for the legacy of my children's children."[357] In thinking through how to demonstrate a commitment to preserving the environment for her future grandchildren, Marya decided only to release this album as a digital album, offering seed packets[358] to the first several dozen people to buy the album in lieu of

[356] Rupa Marya, "Music is Magic is Medicine," Facebook, July 26, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/aprilfishes/photos/a.436240817482/10154689339517483/?type=3&theater.

[357] Aiden Vaziri, "Rupa Marya Operates where Music, Medicine and Social Justice Meet," *Datebook*, last updated April 23, 2019, https://datebook.sfchronicle.com/music/rupa-marya-operates-where-music-medicine-and-social-justice-meet?fbclid=IwAR2QshMuXj6b52Z3O6Wpy-_Bpu2-UBSziXfXv0Kmj725POVm2LiM5gaHqwE.

[358] According to their Kickstarter website, the seed packers included heirloom tomatoes, Italian basil, baby lettuce, indigenous corn, arugula, and parsley: https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/growingupward/growing-upward.

plastic CDs and cases. Her hope is that listeners will plant the seeds and learn how to care for them, creating a movement to encourage more urban farming project that, if spread, could help people have access to medicinal plants and healthy, inexpensive food. Once again, this showcases the myriad approaches that Marya uses in order to attempt to achieve social justice.

Politics, Protest Music, and Nostalgia

Marya's music expresses clear political views about the state of the world and what the world could or should be. She is also active in protests in the United States, particularly around issues of racial violence and environmental destruction. These two issues are inextricably linked in the Bay Area and throughout the United States. It is well-documented that oil refineries, power plants, waste treatment plants, and other environmentally destructive industries are more likely to appear in neighborhoods with larger populations of people of color, especially Black and Latinx Americans.[359] The reverse is also true: affordable housing is also more likely to be built next to industrial plants because wealthy people can afford to pay more for land that is far from them. In the Bay Area, environmental activists have been organizing around environmental racism for years in majority Black and Latinx cities like Richmond, where the Chevron oil refinery releases carcinogenic and asthma-causing fumes into the atmosphere.[360] Similarly, organizations like the Asia Pacific Environmental Network, the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives, and Communities for a Better Environment have been holding public meetings in Oakland to discuss how to mitigate the effects of pollution in these communities.[361] Marya has been directly involved in organizing around some of these issues, such as organizing a 2019 campaign to stop AB&I Foundry, an Oakland-based plumbing materials manufacturer, from releasing fumes that cause a chemical smell in Oakland every morning. Using her social media following as a method of organizing, Marya has been encouraging Oakland residents to call the Bay Area Air Quality Management District (BAAQMD) to report the smell, in order to gain traction to potentially stop the release of the fumes.[362] Her capacity to take the lead on so many different issues simultaneously is impressive, and as the replies to her social media posts around this issue reveal, people are thankful for her capacity to do a lot of legwork. They contribute to her efforts by asking additional questions, doing additional research, and relaying their own experiences with exposure to environmental toxins.

Additionally, as discussed in the previous section, Marya's most recent Rupa and the

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[359] See, for example, Lisa Sun-Hee Park and David N. Pellow, "Racial Formation, Environmental Racism, and the Emergence of Silicon Valley," *Ethnicities* 4, no. 3 (2004): 403-24; and Robert D. Bullard, "Overcoming Racism in Environmental Decisionmaking," *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development* 36, no. 4 (1994): 10-44.
[360] Maya Cohen, "Big Oil, Small Town: The Fight For Environmental Justice in Richmond, California," *Medium*, pub. December 5, 2017, https://medium.com/@mayahrc/big-oil-small-town-the-fight-for-environmental-justice-in-richmond-california-97324244caff.
[361] Marisa Johnson, "Undoing Oakland's History of Environmental Racism as We Address Climate Change in California," *Greenlining.org*, posted May 12, 2017, http://greenlining.org/blog/2017/undoing-oaklands-history-environmental-racism/.
[362] Rupa Marya, "UPDATE ON CHEMICAL SMELL EAST OAKLAND," Facebook, May 8, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/rupamarya/posts/10214714906971318.

April Fishes music presents ideas about how to fight environmental racism and protest institutions that uphold it. In this section, I explore some literature on music and protest to think through what we might gain from considering Marya's music as protest music. In order to do so, we need to understand what makes music protest music. Is it about function, impact, or content? Does intent of the artist or songwriter matter, or should protest songs be considered protest pieces on their own? Is there a discernable difference between being a political musician and a protest musician? Although these are questions that, in some way, could be applied to all four artists in this study, they are of particular interest to me in relation to Marya, since of the four, she is the most directly engaged in enacting political changes. She regularly shows up to protests, organizes with other activists, and works in both her personal and professional life to directly address conditions intolerable to her in the Bay Area, the United States, and the world. The larger argument in this chapter, that everything Marya does, no matter how disjointed it seems on the surface, is part of her work as a political activist and healer, is bolstered by revising existing models on protest music and politically engaged musicians by revealing what these models are missing.

Rupa and the April Fishes are well-known enough to sell out small venues in North America and to headline world music festivals in Europe, yet they do not have the kind of success that gives them wide reach outside of these circles. Their level of political engagement means they are regularly invited to play at political festivals in the Bay Area, particularly festivals oriented around environmental sustainability, such as the Eco-Farm conference,[363] Run4Salmon,[364] and the Global Climate Action Summit.[365] At the same time, they are not played on commercial radio stations, their non-festival shows are generally in smaller clubs or venues, and their music has not been adopted by large-scale protest movements to be sung en masse.

I ask the following questions: what makes music protest music? And, perhaps more importantly, what do we gain by calling music protest music? Although music has been used in protest in the United States since at least revolutionary times, most studies on protest music in the United States focus on the Folk Revival of the 1950s and 1960s to protest the Vietnam War, or the use of freedom songs during Civil Rights Era protests.[366] Many of these studies focus on particular songs and their function within protest movements. For example, Shana Redmond's

[363] https://eco-farm.org/conference/2019/session/ecofarm-dance-900-1130pm
[364] http://www.run4salmon.org/
[365] https://sanjosejazz.org/artist/rupa-and-the-april-fishes/
[366] See Lawrence M. Berger, "The Emotional and Intellectual Aspects of Protest Music: Implications for Community Organizing Education," *Journal of Teaching in Social Work* 20, no. 1/2 (2000): 57-76; Thomas Vernon Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Present* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019); Dick Weissman, *Blues* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2005); Gillian Mitchell, *The North American Folk Music Revival: Nation and Identity in the United States and Canada, 1945–1980* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Brett Sharp, "Influencing American Foreign Policy Through Popular Music," in *Homer Simpson Goes to Washington: American Politics through Popular Culture*, ed. Joseph J. Foy (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2010), 205; and Shana L. Redmond, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

book *Anthem* (2013), examines six Black "anthems" that have been used in social movements in the African diaspora.[367] These songs "were absolutely central to the unfolding politics because they held within them the doctrines and beliefs of the people who participated in their performance."[368] For Redmond, the function of these specific songs is important, because their presence have tangible effects on Black people who use them by constituting communities oriented around particular beliefs to achieve particular aims. An anthem "creates collective engagement in performance and contributes to a dense Black performance history that continually configures Black citizenship through shared ambitions and intersectional identities."[369] Anthems, then, have helped transform Black communities' visions of who they are and what is possible. In this context, performance participation refers to both singers and listeners. How the songs are used and the effects of their use are what make them noteworthy.

In *Red, Whites, and Blues*, William G. Roy similarly writes about the embeddedness of music in social movements, claiming that music "*entrains* interaction, coordinating how people interact" and that how "people talk about music—what they say, what it means to them, and how discourse underlies social relationships—is inseparable from how people hear music and what it means to them."[370] Like Redmond, Roy notes that it is not simply the lyrical content that makes protest music powerful; there is something about the sound of music that "entrains" interaction in the context of protest. Thus, music has concrete effects in protest that are disconnected, or at least not the sole result of their linguistic content or meaning. For both of these scholars, music has the power to change both individual and collective experiences of people in social movements. In other words, similar to how I discussed the creation of joy in Red Baraat concerts (Chapter 3), in protest, music has a Durkheimian potential to generate collective effervescence.[371]

What Redmond and Roy do not do, however, is discuss the role of songwriters. Since the songs they choose were largely passed down through oral tradition in these movements, they place consumption and dissemination of the songs at the front and center. The songs take on lives of their own, completely decontextualized from the musicians who created them or first popularized them. The artists' intentions became irrelevant to their projects. However, there are studies on music and social protest that focus on popular artists' role and intentions. In *The Resisting Muse: Popular Music and Social Protest*, editor Ian Peddle has compiled several essays on popular music artists who have been involved in social protest. John Street's essay, "The Pop Star as Politician," for example, focuses on how artists like John Lennon, Marvin Gaye, and Bono have used their fame to draw attention to particular political issues. Street distinguishes between protest music and music of resistance, arguing that protest music is

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[367] Shana Redmond, *Anthem*, 2. Redmond uses "anthem" in this book to refer to songs that have particular sociopolitical meanings *and*, as a result of those meanings, have the ability to mobilize communities.
[368] Ibid., 8.
[369] Ibid., 13.
[370] William G. Roy, *Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States*, Vol. 45 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 12-14.
[371] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Swain (New York: The Free Press, 1965 [1912]).

intended to serve as such by the artist, while music of resistance is used for political aims regardless of the performer's intentions.[372] I disagree with these labels, aligning myself more with Redmond since what makes protest music significant is *how* the music is used. But rather than focusing on Street's labels, I wish to highlight Street's distinction between what an artist intends their music to be used for and how it is actually used. Although fame is useful for reaching a large number of people, popular artists on corporate music labels often have little control over how their music is used. Labels, especially large ones, often discourage political protest in order to maintain the widest possible audience.[373]

This has been exacerbated since at least the 1980s, when, as Brett Sharp writes in "Influencing American Foreign Policy Through Popular Music," changes in ownership of broadcast stations resulted in "a smaller number of corporate entities [acquiring] a greater number of radio stations."[374] The net result of this is that artists with clear political agendas have rarely gotten airplay on mainstream stations since the 1980s, and instead have been forced to bypass the corporate music industry entirely by releasing their music independently. Sharp shows how artists with already large followings, like Rage Against the Machine, System of a Down, and the Beastie Boys, bypassed their record labels effectively by releasing protest music through their websites for free. The effectiveness of this strategy was limited, though, because people who were already fans of these bands would need to go to their websites and spread word of new releases through social media, making it more complicated and possibly more difficult to acquire new listeners who might be open to their political messages. Social media can be an effective way of popularizing music, but the commercial music industry still has wider reach even on these platforms because they have the ability to pay for targeted advertising to users.[375] Moreover, according to Sharp, artists who became popular in earlier decades for their political stances against the Vietnam War, like Joan Baez and Bob Dylan, may not have had platforms in the first place had corporate radio been homogenized in the 1960s.[376] In other words, the changes to telecommunications ownership had a major impact on popular music consumption, eliminating the wide dissemination of protest music until the viral internet video (and particularly YouTube) era that began in the mid-2000s made it possible for artists to reach larger audiences by self-producing and releasing content for the first time.

Knowing this, what are we to make of artists like Rupa Marya, whose musical messages of political protest are explicit, who plays small shows and some large, but relatively grassroots festivals, but whose music has a relatively small reach? Certainly, being in an era where

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[372] John Street, "The Pop Star as Politician: from Belafonte to Bono, from Creativity to Conscience," in *The Resisting Muse: Popular Music and Social Protest*, ed. Ian Peddle (New York: Routledge, 2017), 50.
[373] Deena Weinstein, "Rock Protest Songs: So Many and So Few," in *The Resisting Muse: Popular Music and Social Protest*, ed. Ian Peddle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 8-10.
[374] Sharp, "Influencing American Foreign Policy," 205.
[375] David Allan, "A Content Analysis of Music Placement in Prime-Time Television Advertising," *Journal of Advertising Research* 48, no. 3 (2008): 404-17; and Mark Fox and Bruce Wrenn, "A broadcasting Model for the Music Industry," *International Journal on Media Management* 3, no. 2 (2001): 112-19.
[376] Sharp, "Influencing American Foreign Policy," 205.

mainstream radio airplay is less important due to digital media platforms helps: As of 2019, Rupa & the April Fishes currently have over 20,000 followers on their public Facebook page, and Marya herself over 5,800 followers on her personal page, which is also public. But, these numbers seem tiny compared with those of megastars like Taylor Swift, who boasts tens of millions of followers, or even other independent artists like Ani DiFranco, who, despite never having received a great deal of mainstream airplay, claims over 300,000 followers. Can political music be protest music if its impact is narrower? In short, I would like to suggest that existing models for protest music are incomplete. In the case of someone like Marya, both intent and use matter, even if the impact is smaller. The audiences at Rupa and the April Fishes' shows are attentive and engaged with Marya's politics, and she uses music as both a method for self-healing, to draw attention to political problems, and to convey hope for a different future.

In this way, I wish to answer what we might gain from calling Marya a protest musician. The way she utilizes music mirrors the way Joseph Thompson writes about musician Anne Romaine. Romaine was a folk musician, activist, and historian from the 1960s-90s, and a grassroots organizer fighting on behalf of civil rights and labor organizations. Like Marya, her reach was relatively concentrated, and her life revolved around working toward a more just future. As Thompson describes:

> Romaine sought to create interracial understanding through a hybrid nostalgia that served competing visions of the future: she joined racial liberalism's proponents in hoping for integration; at the same time, she was sympathetic with an emergent vision of Black Power radicalism…but Romaine did not root her nostalgia in the past to evoke a simpler time of hazy, bygone days. Instead, she wanted to remind southerners of the most radical moments of their history in order to pave a way forward.[377]

The parallels between Marya and Romaine are many. Like Romaine, Marya's work is laden with a sense of nostalgia for a past that never quite existed as she describes it. Marya frequently imagines a past before capitalism and colonialism, a time when living beings operated in balance with one another. Although it is clear that capitalism and colonialism have significantly altered the planet in a way that has never been seen before historically, to say that pre-colonial societies had no significant negative impacts on the earth is an area of significant debate by archaeologists.[378] But like Romaine, Marya is not so much interested in returning to the past; she

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[377] Joseph M. Thompson, "Nostalgic for Utopia: Anne Romaine's Folk Music Protest in the New Left South," *Southern Cultures* 24, no. 3 (2018): 46.

[378] See, for example, Gifford Miller, John Magee, Mike Smith, Nigel Spooner, Alexander Baynes, Scott Lehman, Marilyn Fogel et al., "Human Predation Contributed to the Extinction of the Australian Megafaunal Bird *Genyornis newtoni* ~47 ka," *Nature Communications* 7 (2016): 10496; Chris Clarkson, Zenobia Jacobs, Ben Marwick, Richard Fullagar, Lynley Wallis, Mike Smith, Richard G. Roberts et al., "Human Occupation of Northern Australia by 65,000 Years Ago," *Nature* 547, no. 7663 (2017): 306; David A. Burney and Timothy F. Flannery, "Fifty Millennia of Catastrophic Extinctions after Human Contact," *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* 20, no. 7 (2005): 395-401; and Donald K. Grayson and David J. Meltzer, "Revisiting Paleoindian Exploitation of Extinct North American Mammals," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 56 (2015): 177-93.

is interested in creating a future world that is rooted in ideas of balance and healing that come from indigenous communities and communities of color. Her music is the artistic expression of these hopes, and small though her following may be, her sustained protest work makes her a protest musician.

In short, one of the largest gaps in protest music literature is the issue of scale. By labeling Rupa Marya a protest musician, I have begun to showcase how smaller-scale, grassroots artists contribute to the building of larger-scale protest movements, creating a broader picture of how everyday protest functions. Protest music is not only about the way people come together at particular events around a particular piece of music. It is also not simply about an artist's wide reach. Protest music can also be a reflection of how someone lives her life by networking with numerous other grassroots activists to work toward a radically different future.

Bay Area Inequity and Activism

it's googlestan or applestan or a billionaire's breeding game
it's a place of immense beauty and pain
where there's more than enough for everyone,
you hear what i'm saying?

– Rupa and the April Fishes, "Where You From?"

Marya chose to move back to the Bay Area after finishing medical school, in large part because of her familiarity with the arts and activism scenes there, hoping to create a sustainable life as both physician and musician in an area with a long history of social justice organizing. Her interest in addressing systemic inequalities began at a young age, and she credits her early travels to France, Spain, and India as opening her eyes to different socioeconomic statuses and racial injustices. Having been born shortly after the pan-ethnic Asian American movement, which began in the late 1960s largely on Bay Area college campuses, Marya was also aware of how Asian Americans formed coalitions with Black, Chicano, and Native American students to fight for educational rights and the formation of Ethnic Studies departments.[379]

Marya's own family, however, cared little about advocacy and activism. In fact, her family generally viewed her as strange and strident, and they struggled to understand why she refused to embody the feminine qualities they valued: restraint and diffidence. Feeling alienated from her South Asian American family and friends drove her interest in being an activist. Vividly entrenched in her mind is the stern voice of her father during her college years declaring, "I will disown you if you do anything on stage. No one wants to hear what a Brown woman has to say."[380] Experiencing the devaluation of Brown women's voices in her own community both scarred Marya and inspired her to speak out against gendered violence.

Physical abuse, she noticed, was also normalized within her South Asian circles. After returning to the Bay, Marya began networking with like-minded South Asian American activists.

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[379] Michael Liu, Kim Geron and Tracy Lai, *The Snake Dance of Asian American Activism: Community, Vision, and Power* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008).
[380] Rupa Marya, interview by author, Berkeley, CA, August 16, 2016.

She found them in progressive organizations like Maitri,[381] a Bay Area-based South Asian nonprofit that provides resources for domestic, sexual, and emotional abuse, and the South Asian Berkeley Radical Walking Tour,[382] run by East Bay activists Anirvan Chatterjee and Barnali Ghosh. Her desire to do more activist work intensified as she grew to learn about oppression in other communities of color that she treated medically.

Like many contemporary activists, Marya believes that problems of patriarchal violence, environmental degradation, and racism cannot be examined in isolation from one another; rather, they are systemic problems with roots in colonialism and present-day manifestations of white supremacy and neoliberal capitalism. The role of colonialism, especially settler colonialism, in the development of neoliberal capitalism is explained well by scholars David Lloyd and Patrick Wolfe, who write that rather than viewing colonialism as a "transitional phase that gives way to" neoliberal capitalism, "it is foundational to that order" because capitalism required the seizure of lands and the exploitation of colonized peoples in order to thrive.[383] In the nineteenth century, this was mostly in the form of relying on exploited populations as a labor force.[384] In the twentieth century, since the increase in automated jobs has resulted in a surplus of people, "[it] is in relation to this community of redundancy ... that settler colonialism's inventory of local strategies is becoming increasingly congenial to neoliberalism's emergent world order"[385] because marginalized people are increasingly sequestered from the middle and upper echelons of society. This is not terribly different than settler colonialism, wherein colonists systematically conquer, replace, and/or sequester indigenous populations.

Addressing these issues first involves understanding how they emerged. The complex and varied past of the Bay Area serves as a microcosm for how these systemic oppressions have manifested throughout United States history and into the present. Although many activists in the Bay Area blame the tech industry for the rising costs of living and decreasing diversity, especially in the number of underrepresented minorities,[386] over the past decade, racial injustice has magnified the economic inequality present in the Bay Area since Spanish colonial rule. In "Racial Formation, Environmental Racism, and the Emergence of Silicon Valley," Lisa Sun-Hee Park and David N. Pellow state that to understand how race operates in the Bay Area, it is necessary to analyze how European colonial ideas about environmental domination have shaped both the literal landscape and, as a direct result, the racial and political landscape.[387] They argue that as soon as European settlers arrived in the Bay Area, they began to exploit people of color, forcing them to work and reside in subpar environmental and economic conditions.

Park and Pellow go on to discuss the three major colonial and post-colonial eras of the

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[381] https://maitri.org/.
[382] http://www.berkeleysouthasian.org/.
[383] David Lloyd and Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonial Logics and the Neoliberal Regime," *Settler Colonial Studies* 6, no. 2 (2016): 112-13.
[384] Ibid., 112.
[385] Ibid.
[386] Especially poor Black and Latinx populations, but other non-White and working-class populations as well.
[387] Park and Pellow, "Racial Formation," 403-24.

Bay Area. During Spanish rule, the Ohlone people of the Bay Area peninsula were enslaved, forced to build missions and convert to Christianity. Any resistance was met with violence, and the Ohlone were required to perform manual labor with no protection from the detrimental effects of this labor, such as exposure to pollution, injury, and the destruction of their natural environment. This era of forced labor and conversion lasted until the middle of the nineteenth century, when California became part of the United States and the Gold Rush era began to wane.

The state began to move toward an agricultural economy by the 1850s; this economy persisted in the present-day Silicon Valley until about 1970. During the agricultural period, the focus of exploitation shifted toward newly arriving immigrants, including Chinese, Sikhs, Japanese, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Filipinos. Similar to Native Americans during the colonial era, immigrant farm laborers were exposed to unsafe working conditions and forced to live in areas that were disproportionately affected by environmental destruction and pollution. Finally, by the 1970s, the shift toward technology industries overtook the Bay's agricultural industry, giving rise to Silicon Valley. According to Park and Pellow, the Silicon Valley age, like the previous two eras, is characterized by imposing domination over the environment and natural resources. This happens primarily at the expense of non-White people: toxic waste facilities are built in primarily non-White and working-class neighborhoods; sewage is dispensed in parts of the Bay where non-White people fish or source their drinking water; and laborers in these facilities are primarily non-White and working-class. Put succinctly, "These racial ideologies associated White middle-class populations with cleaner environments and therefore set the stage (or rather built on prior racial discursive practices in the area) for the devaluation of people of color and the spaces (occupational and residential) they occupy in the new economy."[388] As stated earlier, this kind of environmental racism and economic injustice is well documented throughout the United States,[389] and the Bay Area is no exception. Organizations resisting these processes have also taken root in the area, however, with local grassroots organizations like Movement Generation[390] pushing for an economic transition away from capitalism in order to prevent environmental collapse.

Marya, who runs in similar circles to many of the leaders of Movement Generation, agrees, believing that addressing environmental and economic inequity in tandem is necessary to assure the future success of human beings as a species. For the last several years, she has been

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[388] Park and Pellow, "Racial Formation," 410-15.

[389] See Laura Pulido, "Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90, no. 1 (2000): 12-40; Robert D. Bullard, "Anatomy of Environmental Racism and the Environmental Justice Movement," *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots* 15 (1993): 23; Robert D. Bullard, "Dismantling Environmental Racism in the USA," *Local Environment* 4, no. 1 (1999): 5-19; Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster, *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Melissa Checker, *Polluted Promises: Environmental Racism and the Search for Justice in a Southern Town* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); and Laura Westra and Bill Lawson, eds., *Faces of Environmental Racism: Confronting Issues of Global Justice* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001).

[390] https://movementgeneration.org/

working with indigenous healers, activists, and environmentalists in the Bay Area to address these issues, attending rallies to shut down polluting power plants throughout the Bay, playing concerts for organizations that aim to protect Northern California waterways (such as the annual Run4Salmon benefit[391]), and working to restore indigenous land rights. These Bay-area based activists do not work in isolation, however. It is through her connections to indigenous activists that Marya first became involved in the Dakota Access Pipeline resistance at Standing Rock (discussed below). The grassroots activist efforts in which Marya operates are strengthened by loosely connected networks that answer one another's calls for support when in need.

The World According to Marya

it's a mistake of history
to relegate to mystery
how we ended up this way
through genocide and ecocide
black, brown and poor made slaves
this isn't the way it has to be
this isn't some kind of natural destiny
this isn't the way we can keep on living
the earth is generous, but the climate is unforgiving

– Rupa and the April Fishes, "Where You From?"

In 2001, Marya began writing songs in French and Spanish, languages she learned during her travels as a child. That was the same year her father had passed away, and between that loss and 9/11, Marya felt particularly compelled to address her self-described "post-national" identity in her music. In part, this meant that she wanted her US American, Spanish, French, and North Indian influences to come across more explicitly in her music. Even more, she hoped to convey to others that "notions of nationality or even cultural identity are relatively provincial."[392] Distaste for borders is a recurring theme in Marya's music and her rhetoric on social media. She frequently writes about an imagined world in which borders are eradicated.

When I first began studying Marya, I was tempted to write off such statements as utopian concepts whose practical applications had not been thought through. As I got to know her better, I realized that Marya, a thoughtful and strategic person, must have thought through how this could be possible. When we met again in August 2017, I asked her how she thought the world could operate differently. She explained her belief that indigenous people around the world are the people who have the knowledge to live in balance with the Earth and institute equity. Healing the Earth requires listening to what the earth says, she told me. "I think the answer is being given to us by the Earth right now" in the form of climate change.

[P]eoples who live with Earth-based perspectives, which are indigenous people around

[391] Run4Salmon is an annual event run by the Winnemem Wintu tribe to raise money in order to revive historic salmon runs in Northern California that have been disrupted by human intervention because of dam-building and re-routing rivers: http://www.run4salmon.org/.
[392] Rupa Marya, interview by author, Berkeley, CA, August 16, 2016.

> the world, are the people who should be in charge right now because we, those of us who live and have bought into societies that are not Earth-based have fucked it up … and it's going to become unlivable for everybody…. The world should be run by indigenous councils all over the world ... and a global world order that's based on Earth care.[393]

"How do you imagine that transition happening?" I asked.

This is a tougher question, Marya admitted, but it starts with showing up for the people who are most negatively impacted by climate change, race wars, and patriarchal and state violence. She does not think this is an easy task; by contrast, she is often cynical about the future of humankind. However, giving up in the face of unfavorable odds is not an acceptable solution to Marya. Everywhere she travels, she makes it a point to ask local indigenous people if she has permission to enter their territory. This move is as personal as it is political: by doing so, she demonstrates her respect toward the people who first occupied the territory, but she also draws other peoples' attention to the fact that most of us are still occupying stolen land without a second thought. Small steps, for Marya, can make a huge difference. For example, in a November 2017 meeting with Oakland mayor, Libby Schaaf, Marya "plant[ed] the seed of indigenous restitution in Oakland, [asking the mayor] to give back land to the Ohlone."[394] In the Facebook post about this experience, Marya stated that although she generally feels skepticism and animosity toward politicians, she felt heard, and that was a step toward healing. The spread of these small, sustained efforts are how grassroots movements begin to succeed. Marya lives her life working toward this transition, creating, maintaining, and participating in activist networks with similar goals.

Water is Life

My boat is sinking, there's nothing left to do except enjoy the view
I know what you're thinking, that soon this'll be the end of me
I used to think that, too
But the water will save me
Yes, the water will save me

– Rupa and the April Fishes, "Water"

In the last decade, activists like Marya have begun establishing new radical leftist organizing strategies by moving beyond underground movements and involving powerful institutions. To this end, Marya spearheaded the creation of the Do No Harm Coalition at UCSF in the summer of 2016. The Do No Harm Coalition was inspired by the Frisco 5, a group of demonstrators protesting the lack of accountability faced by the San Francisco Police Department in the deaths of several unarmed men shot and killed by police officers between 2014 and 2016. Marya had been attuned to the unjust use of deadly force against marginalized people since at least 2011 when Charles Hill, a homeless patient of Marya's suffering from

[393] Rupa Marya, interview by author, Berkeley, CA, August 25, 2017.
[394] Rupa Marya, "Last Month, I Learned that Mayor Libby Schaaf of Oakland is a Fan of My Music," Facebook, November 18, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/rupamarya/posts/10210793092208400.

mental illness, was shot and killed by BART police. Upon hearing of his death, Marya wrote:

> While I had seen [Charles] agitated before … I never would have described him as threatening in such a way as to warrant the use of deadly force. We [medical professionals] often have to deal with agitated—sometimes even violent—patients in the hospital. Through teamwork, tools and training, we have not had to fatally wound our patients in order to subdue them. I understand the police are there to protect us and react to the situation around them, but I wonder if the officer who shot Charles … possessed other training methods to subdue an agitated man with a knife or a bottle.[395]

Influenced by the Black Lives Matter movement, the Frisco 5 went on a hunger strike outside of a San Francisco Police Department office for 17 days beginning on April 21, 2016. Marya and a group of interns from UCSF administered free medical treatment to the hunger strikers.

During the Frisco 5 protest, Marya became convinced that a more permanent organization should be formed dedicated to treating state violence as a public health crisis.

Figure 5.3 Rupa Marya holding promoting the Do No Harm Coalition.[396]

She quickly persuaded leaders and colleagues at UCSF to officially back the creation of the Do No Harm Coalition in July of 2016.

Along with this coalition, Marya continues to work on projects that combine Western notions of medicine with indigenous forms of healing to fight systemic inequities. For example, starting in late 2016 and through 2017, Marya and other medical professionals at the Do No Harm Coalition treated indigenous patients on the frontlines of the Dakota Access Pipeline

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[395] Jessica Lum, "MD Who Treated Man Shot and Killed by BART Police Will Join Monday's Protest," *Mission Local*, posted August 28, 2011, https://missionlocal.org/2011/08/md-who-treated-transient-shot-and-killed-by-bart-police-will-join-mondays-protest/.

[396] Rupa Marya, "#DoNoHarm," Facebook, May 20, 2016, https://www.facebook.com/aprilfishes/photos/a.436240817482/10153547435212483/?type=3&theater.

protest on the Standing Rock Sioux reservation in North Dakota. Noting that regular healthcare was not easily available for those living on the reservation, Marya began developing an idea for a health clinic at Standing Rock. Citing studies that demonstrate better health outcomes for people treated with multiple, culturally sensitive medical approaches, she, along with Sioux leaders, began imagining a clinic that would practice what they call "decolonized medicine." Working with local healers, this new clinic will cater to the specific needs of the Standing Rock community, using traditional Sioux methods of healing – which often include music – along with Western medical practices. UCSF is partnering with the reservation to make the Mni Wiconi Health Clinic (Mni Wiconi meaning "Water is Life") a reality.

In a 2018 article for Bioneers, a conference that is dedicated to bringing together innovators in science, technology, and the humanities to solve environmental degradation, Marya wrote more explicitly about the importance of decolonizing medicine. Essentially, the Do No Harm coalition aims to expose "the social structures that are creating the underlying diseases and the disease differences" that doctors see.[397] The differences that correlate to race, as Marya points out, are not because of inherent biological differences between races, but rather, because of the ways that social structures impact racialized groups.

While in Standing Rock, Marya met and treated patients with injuries sustained at the hands of law enforcement: bruising from police batons, blindness from rubber bullets to the face, hypothermia from high pressure water hoses dousing protestors in sub-freezing temperatures, and a variety of other injuries from inhumane tactics. Horrified by the atrocities she witnessed, Marya wrote in a blog post:

> I hold myself to Gandhi's principles of direct nonviolent civil disobedience to advance the case for justice…. I am reading the Bhagavad Gita, the Hindu text my father read every day of his life, which details a historic war and the dialogue around the necessity to rise to fight, because it is our duty. I am a nonviolent warrior. I come from a very long line of warriors. My ancestry traces directly from the Hindu figure, Krishna. I feel my own awakening in this work, on such a deep level, such an ownership of my own ancestral ties beyond patriarchal violence, deep into the heart of South Asia…. I am honored to work to stand against 500 years of environmental racism.[398]

In this passage, we see how Marya connects her own cultural legacy of nonviolent resistance to the American indigenous protests at Standing Rock, viewing her involvement as fighting against an extension of the same colonial violence that her South Asian ancestors faced. In other words, Marya uses her work as a musician, activist, and physician to build various coalitions to fight against neoliberal capitalism: by suing large music corporations, diverting resources to indigenous lands to create holistic medical clinics, and independently producing and releasing digital music in order to avoid creating more plastic waste.

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[397] Rupa Marya, "Rupa Marya: Decolonizing Medicine for Healthcare that Serves All," *Bioneers*, accessed July 19, 2019, https://bioneers.org/rupa-marya-decolonizing-medicine-for-healthcare-that-serves-all-ztvz1809/.

[398] Rupa Marya, "Standing Rock Diary: I am Honored to be a Healer Warrior," *48Hills*, pub. November 27, 2016, https://48hills.org/2016/11/i-am-honored-healer-standing-rock/.

It is worth taking a moment to acknowledge that Marya's view of herself as a Hindu warrior deserves some critique. Although Marya has experienced racial violence as a woman of Indian descent, in the passage above she uses her ancestral caste as a way to substantiate her position as a social justice warrior, which is ironic, given that the caste system has been used in India to oppress lower-caste Hindus and non-Hindus. Moreover, she draws upon the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi, whose reputation has been called into question in recent years, particularly around issues of feminism and racism.[399] What I am suggesting is that although her criticism of White structures of power are often justified and fact-based, Marya has a tendency to downplay or ignore power structures that have existed for centuries within non-White cultures. It does reveal a significant area of room for growth, understanding, and development in relation to her own South Asian identity, though I do not believe this diminishes the work she is doing to decolonize medicine.

Decolonizing medicine means taking a population's cultural healing knowledge seriously and using it to improve their health outcomes. At Standing Rock, this means "allowing the Lakota practitioners, the Lakota cosmology of understanding and health, to dominate."[400] For the Black and Brown people who are routinely targeted and over-policed, it means dialoguing with correctional officers and institutions to create more just policing tactics. For the Do No Harm Coalition, healing is much broader than simply treating ill patients; it also requires treating the social structures that cause illness. For Marya, this means using music as a method of healing herself. In a 2019 interview, she stated that she "realized that's what music is, it's the original medicine"[401] because it has the potential to heal by generating hormones that have self-curative properties. This is another example of a magical process, because although we believe that music stimulates the release of positive hormones,[402] we do not understand how or why the brain processes musical sounds in this manner.

Conclusion

Marya's politics were not created in a vacuum; in fact, they align well with contemporary radical leftist organizations. Unlike moderate leftists who were surprised and horrified by the

[399] See Veena Rani Howard, "Gandhi's Reconstruction of the Feminine: Toward an Indigenous Hermeneutics," in *Woman and Goddess in Hinduism*, ed. Tracy Pintchman and R. Sherma (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 197-217; Takudzwa Hillary Chiwanza, "What History Won't Tell You: Mahatma Gandhi Was Ridiculously Anti-Black and Misogynistic," *The African Exponent*, posted May 1, 2018. https://www.africanexponent.com/post/8960-gandhi-was-very-racist-and-had-an-inherent-hatred-for-women; and Thenmozhi Soundararajan, "Why It is Time to Dump Gandhi," *Medium*, pub. June 14, 2017, https://medium.com/@dalitdiva/why-it-is-time-to-dump-gandhi-b59c7399fe66.

[400] Rupa Marya, "Standing Rock Diary."

[401] Aiden Vaziri, "Rupa Marya Operates."

[402] See, for example, Chanda and Levitin's thorough review of literature on music and neurochemistry: Mona Lisa Chanda and Daniel J. Levitin, "The Neurochemistry of Music," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 17, no. 4 (2013): 179-93.

election of Donald Trump, Marya and other radical leftists see his rise to power as the natural outgrowth of increasingly uneven wealth distribution throughout the United States. For her, right-wing conservatives are not the only people to blame; she sees Democratic politicians like Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton as equally culpable because of their blind allegiance to neoliberal capitalism and US patriotism. She explains, "[T]hat disgruntled rage [of the middle and lower classes] has different manifestations, whether it's Occupy or Bernie Sanders. And then the worst possible manifestation is this combination of this tribalism, this nationalism, this white supremacy … which [gets tied] to the economic problem, much in the way that the fascists did in Europe in the early 1900s."[403] Like other radical leftists, she does not see a peaceful way forward in capitalism. Rather, she imagines a new economic system that relies heavily on community-based subsistence, flexible and adaptable to peoples' specific needs.

Toppling neoliberal capitalism through a series of seemingly disconnected efforts seems dauntingly idealistic. However, though they have lofty goals, activists like Marya use pragmatic strategies to achieve results. As Ruth Reitan writes, "global activisits are often more realistic than many idealistic scholars who write about them…[T]hey have developed a multi-pronged strategy entailing dynamic, loose, and limited coordination across the spectrum from reform to radicalism."[404] These strategies are not so different from those of previous eras: during the Civil Rights Era, for example, minority groups frequently supported each other's efforts, meaning that the movement was decidedly disjointed and coalitional. The contemporary version, however, also involves people using their positions of power strategically and effectively, involving institutions with economic capital whenever possible. This is the new manifestation of radical leftist activism: a coordinated effort led by representatives from marginalized populations whose strong leadership has helped create partnerships with powerful institutions. They are simultaneously grassroots and mainstream, and together, they are imagining and creating new ways of living that are self-defined.

Marya's worldview is deeply indebted to her South Asian cultural background and the San Francisco Bay Area's history of activism and interracial coalition building. She also uses her medical background and her partnership with a prestigious medical institution to redistribute economic resources toward social justice causes. In fact, without the support of an establishment like UCSF, it is unlikely that she would be able to sustain her activist work in music and medicine so seamlessly. Yet, perhaps her work in music, medicine, and activism should not be considered so peculiar. As Marya told me, "the experience of creating … and enjoying music together produces oxytocin ... the hormone of cooperation and synergy and being together." For Marya, music has the power to increase "the global flow of oxytocin,"[405] a hormone that has the magical power to create and sustain the fight for social justice.

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[403] MDR Kultur, "Interview Rupa & The April Fishes Rudolstadt Festival 2017," video, 15:59, July 9, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-SI60YiR0Q&vl=en.
[404] Ruth Reitan, "Coordinated Power in Contemporary Leftist Activism," in *Power and Transnational Activism*, ed. Thomas Oleson (New York: Routledge, 2011), 51-52.
[405] Rupa Marya, interview by author, Berkeley, CA, August 16, 2016.

Conclusion: SAADA and the History of South Asian American Organizing

On April 8, 2017, just two months before I finished my fieldwork on the East Coast, I attended an event called "Where We Belong: Artists in the Archive" run by the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA)[406] in Philadelphia, just a two-hour bus ride from NYC. I had visited the SAADA website before, but I had never spent any time digging through the archives, nor had I ever attended one of their events. The all-day event took place at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, a nearly two-hundred-year-old building that houses manuscripts and historical documents about the state's history. There were over a hundred attendees, most of whom seemed to be South Asian Americans in their twenties and thirties. The event featured five South Asian American artists, musicians Zain Alam and Rudresh Mahanthappa, visual artists Chiraag Bhakta and Chitra Gensh, and dancer Joti Singh. All of these artists are similar in age and generation to the four musicians featured in this dissertation, and many of them operate in the same artistic and social justice-oriented South Asian American circles.[407] The five artists at the event had each won a grant sponsored by the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage and SAADA to produce a new work of art based on inspiring material from the digital archive.

The day opened with a brief address by SAADA Executive Director, Samip Mallick. In it, Mallick explained that he began the archive in 2009 because of the lack of archival space dedicated to immigrant communities. His "fear was that over time [the South Asian American] community's stories were in danger of being lost, whether that be bit by bit, or lost entirely."[408] By starting the digital archive, Mallick could ensure these histories could be easily accessed for the foreseeable future.

After Mallick's opening, there was an hour-long panel discussion with the five featured artists, moderated by popular WNYC public radio reporter Arun Venugopal. Only two months earlier, Donald Trump had been inaugurated as President of the United States, and Venugopal immediately began by asking the panel how the current political climate was impacting their artistic practices. All of the artists stated that although Trump's election felt threatening, especially because of the anti-immigrant sentiment in the wake of Trump's travel ban, these threats also felt uncannily familiar.

After the election, Joti Singh began thinking about parallels between South Asian activists today and the Ghadar Party in the early twentieth century. The Ghadar Party was a San Francisco-based South Asian organization primarily started by Sikh immigrants in 1913.[409] Their goal was to challenge British colonization on the Indian subcontinent, and they eventually had

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[406] SAADA is an online archive of South Asian American historical and personal narratives and documents: https://www.saada.org.

[407] As mentioned in previous chapters, Iyer has collaborated regularly with Mahanthappa since the late 1990s, and both Iyer and Malhotra have commissioned Bhakta for multiple projects.

[408] Transcription by author.

[409] Parmbir Singh Gill, "A Different Kind of Dissidence: The Ghadar Party, Sikh History and the Politics of Anticolonial Mobilization," *Sikh Formations* 10, no. 1 (2014): 23-41.

over seventy-two branches with around 5,000 South Asian (mostly Indian) men as members.[410] During World War I, several hundred Ghadar Party members attempted to fight the British directly, but due to a successful infiltration of British colonial spies into the group, their plot was foiled and most members involved in the fighting were imprisoned or executed.[411] Although the Ghadar Party were essentially destroyed by the British by the end of World War I, they are still considered to have played a significant role in spreading anti-colonial activism among South Asians in the diaspora. Singh elaborated, during the "Where We Belong" panel:

> [The Ghadar Party] also disseminated literature and poetry that was trying to awaken the feeling of revolution among South Asians across the globe. So the political climate made me look at today and how much of a parallel I see in what we're trying to accomplish today, intertwined with the historical narrative.[412]

In other words, like Singh, the other artists on the panel, and the artists in this dissertation, the Ghadar Party was using creative labor to grow the number of South Asian activists in the diaspora.

Chitra Ganesh and Rudresh Mahanthappa also spoke about South Asian American history. Both described the similarity in their experiences immediately post-9/11 and post-2016 election. As New Yorkers, they had experienced these events acutely, both witnessing the steep rise of anti-South Asian American sentiment in the city where the majority of deaths occurred in the former event, and where the newly elected conservative president lived during the latter event, in the immediate aftermath of each. Ganesh, however, was quick to point out that although her own memories of these issues went back to 9/11, in reality, American fear of South Asians has roots going back over a hundred years to Asian Exclusion: a span punctuated by events like the 1907 Bellingham Riots, wherein South Asians, primarily Sikh men, were violently ousted from the eponymous Washington town.[413] In fact, as I have discussed in the body of this dissertation numerous times, the mainstream US media and the US government view South Asians as, simultaneously, threats to national security *and* highly successful and upwardly mobile immigrants. This is a pattern that likely emerged soon after enslaved Africans were freed and replaced by indentured servants from Asia, writes Moon-Ho Jung in his 2006 book, *Coolies and Cane*.[414] Creating art out of materials in the South Asian American Digital Archive allowed the panelists to deeply engage with a history of South Asian American organizing, community building, and striving to be seen, heard, and recognized as undeniable presences in American culture.

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[410] Gill, "A Different Kind of Dissidence," 25.
[411] Ibid., 26-7.
[412] Transcription by author.
[413] John R. Wunder, "South Asians, Civil Rights, and the Pacific Northwest: The 1907 Bellingham Anti-Indian Riot and Subsequent Citizenship and Deportation Struggles," *Western Legal History: The Journal of the Ninth Judicial Circuit Historical Society* 4, no. 1 (1991): 62-64.
[414] Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2006).

Musician Zain Alam and moderator Arun Venugopal described their desire to seek artistic success as an attempt to overcome "symbolic annihilation,"[415] or the lack of representation of their ethnic or cultural group in media, history, and popular culture. The term was coined by George Gerbner and Larry Gross in their 1976 article about violence on television, who write that "Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation."[416] Since then, the term has gained currency in studies about numerous groups including women,[417] ethnic and racial groups,[418] queer people,[419] and more,[420] to discuss how these groups have been systematically underrepresented, not represented at all, or portrayed primarily using stereotypical or even false representations. As discussed by the panelists, it is only in the last five to ten years that South Asian Americans have had more control over their portrayals in popular media – largely been through the creation of their own content.[421] Similarly, the panelists stated that they saw the digital archive and their own artistic practices as doing more work to undo stereotypes and showcase the diversity of the South Asian American experience.

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[415] George Gerbner and Larry Gross, "Living with Television: The Violence Profile," *Journal of Communication* 26, no. 2 (1976): 173-99.
[416] Ibid., 182.
[417] See Gaye Tuchman, "The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media," in *Culture and Politics: A Reader*, ed. Lane Crothers and Charles Lockhart (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 150-74; Nina Huntemann, "No More Excuses: Using Twitter to Challenge the Symbolic Annihilation of Women in Games," *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no. 1 (2015): 164-67; and Berit Åström, "The Symbolic Annihilation of Mothers in Popular Culture: *Single Father* and the Death of the Mother," *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no. 4 (2015): 593-607.
[418] See Michelle Caswell, "Seeing Yourself in History: Community Archives and the Fight against Symbolic Annihilation," *The Public Historian* 36, no. 4 (2014): 26-37; Robin R. Coleman and Emily Chivers Yochim, "The Symbolic Annihilation of Race: A Review of the 'Blackness' Literature," *African American Research Perspectives* 12 (2008): 1-10; and Hugh Klein and Kenneth S. Shiffman. "Underrepresentation and Symbolic Annihilation of Socially Disenfranchised Groups ('Out Groups') in Animated Cartoons," *The Howard Journal of Communications* 20, no. 1 (2009): 55-72.
[419] See Alex Müller, "Beyond 'Invisibility': Queer Intelligibility and Symbolic Annihilation in Healthcare," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 20, no. 1 (2018): 14-27; Sander De Ridder, Frederik Dhaenens, and Sofie Van Bauwel, "Queer Theory and Change: Towards a Pragmatic Approach to Resistance and Subversion in Media Research on Gay and Lesbian Identities," *Observatorio (OBS*)* 5, no. 2 (2011): 197-215; and Alfred P. Kielwasser and Michelle A. Wolf, "Silence, Difference, and Annihilation: Understanding the Impact of Mediated Heterosexism on High School Students," *The High School Journal* 77, no. 1/2 (1993): 58-79.
[420] Debbie Rodan and Katie Ellis, *Disability, Obesity and Ageing: Popular Media Identifications* (New York: Routledge, 2016); and Amit Kama, "Supercrips Versus the Pitiful Handicapped: Reception of Disabling Images by Disabled Audience Members," *Communications* 29, no. 4 (2004): 447-66.
[421] Consider, for example, the work of Mindy Kaling, Hasan Minhaj, Aziz Ansari, Hannah Simone, Hari Konabolu, Kumail Nanjiani, and Lilly Singh.

After the panel was over, each of the artists presented their progress on the artwork they were creating from archive materials. Guitarist Zain Alam composed a soundtrack for home movies he edited together from the Dhillon family, an Indian and White interracial couple in 1950s Oklahoma. Joti Singh was working on a *bhangra* and Mexican folkloric dance piece based on archival material on Punjabi-Mexican families in California in the mid-1930s. Mahanthappa's new composition was inspired by the formerly famous and now largely forgotten Indian American singer Kuldip Rae Singh, more commonly known as Cool Dip in the 1950s. Ganesh's project used photography and watercolor, as well as iconography from Hinduism and Buddhism, to create artwork about post-9/11 censored documents aimed to silence immigrant communities. Finally, Bhakta's project used the archive to trace his own history as the son of Gujarati motel owners. Using photography as his medium, he documented the contrasts and conflicts he recalled facing as he learned to navigate his Indianness and Americanness. Each of these projects was rich in both personal and larger historical narratives.

After the presentations, each of the attendees was randomly assigned to small groups to work with selected archival materials. In our groups, we were instructed to look and read through the photographs, newspaper articles, and other materials, and to create a small piece of visual narrative artwork, using these media some other artistic tools provided, such as poster boards, markers, and paint. Once we were done, we had the opportunity to walk around, see what other groups created, and learn about the archival materials they worked with.

After the event finished, around twenty of the artists, organizers, and attendees, including myself, spent the late afternoon and early evening at a nearby bar to extend the conversations we had been having since that morning. I had never had the opportunity to spend an entire day with such a large number of South Asian Americans who wanted to openly discuss and share artwork that dealt with experiences of racism, trauma, and resilience. Not only did it reinforce the sense that my research mattered to a number of people, but also it was also life-affirming for me.

Watching the presentations all morning and working with the archival materials with my group inspired me to explore the archive on my own for the first time. In this exploration, I came across a twenty-three-page document from 1976 originally conceived at my university, the University of California, Berkeley. Entitled "Documents of the Committee of Concerned Indian Students and the Committee for Human Rights," it is a collection of thirteen statements of solidarity and position statements, such as the "Women's Liberation in National Liberation Movements" position statement, and the "Statement in Support of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman." The former paper begins, "Women's liberation is a part of the liberation of people… Feminism which simply declares that men oppress women and does not see women's struggle as an integral part of the class struggle cannot provide us with a strategy by which women will obtain emancipation."[422] The subsequent documents contain similar statements, with details altered based on the specific context.

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[422] "Documents of the Committee of Concerned Indian Students and the Committee for Human Rights," Committee of Concerned Indian Students and the Committee for Human Rights, *SAADA,* last updated October 31, 2013, https://www.saada.org/item/20131031-3256, 5. Unfortunately, I was unable to find more sources or documentation about the group itself. I do not know how many Indian students were part of the group, whether or not it was made up of

What struck me most acutely as I read through this document for the first time was how similar the language around solidarity, anti-imperialism, and class oppression was to statements made by the four central musicians in this dissertation. Reading these papers clarified for me how much the work of Rekha Malhotra, Sunny Jain, Vijay Iyer, and Rupa Marya continues a long history of interracial social justice organizing among South Asian Americans. Each of them does it differently. Malhotra's work has primarily been about making space for South Asians to safely form and perform community through her *bhangra* and hip hop deejaying practice. Jain draws upon his religious upbringing to convey the importance of striving to understand and bring together different politics. Iyer uses his position as a successful pianist, composer, and academic to draw attention to racial oppression, especially oppression of African Americans. Finally, Marya combines music and medicine to heal communities of color that have been systematically subjugated by the state over hundreds of years.

Social justice movements within and between communities around the world have always influenced each other, as evidenced by Laura Pulido's work on third world radicalism in the 1960s and 1970s in Southern California.[423] Whether or not they consciously draw upon this history of interracial and community social justice organizing at any given moment, the history exists, and continues to exist, in part through the work of artists and activists like them.

For me, the SAADA event in Philadelphia in April 2017 reinforced why the work Malhotra, Jain, Iyer, and Marya do is important, relevant, and worthy of study. They are parts of a larger network of social justice activists and artists in the South Asian American community. Their professional success as musicians has given them wide reach and access to elite spaces, and they use these privileges strategically.

These four musicians are unique in the ways they routinely incorporate social justice advocacy and activism into their artistic practices. The sounds they create, the words they write and say, the political actions they organize, and the people with whom they collaborate are all part and parcel of their work as artists. Rekha Malhotra, Sunny Jain, Vijay Iyer, and Rupa Marya, lead complex artistic lives, using their musical practices to create a more racially equitable world. By considering all of these dimensions holistically, I have striven to show the multifaceted nature of musicians' work.

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both undergraduate and graduate students, whether they were first- or second-generation Indian Americans, or any other pertinent information. I do know their papers were co-sponsored by the Radical Student Union and the Asian Student Union.

[423] Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left*.

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